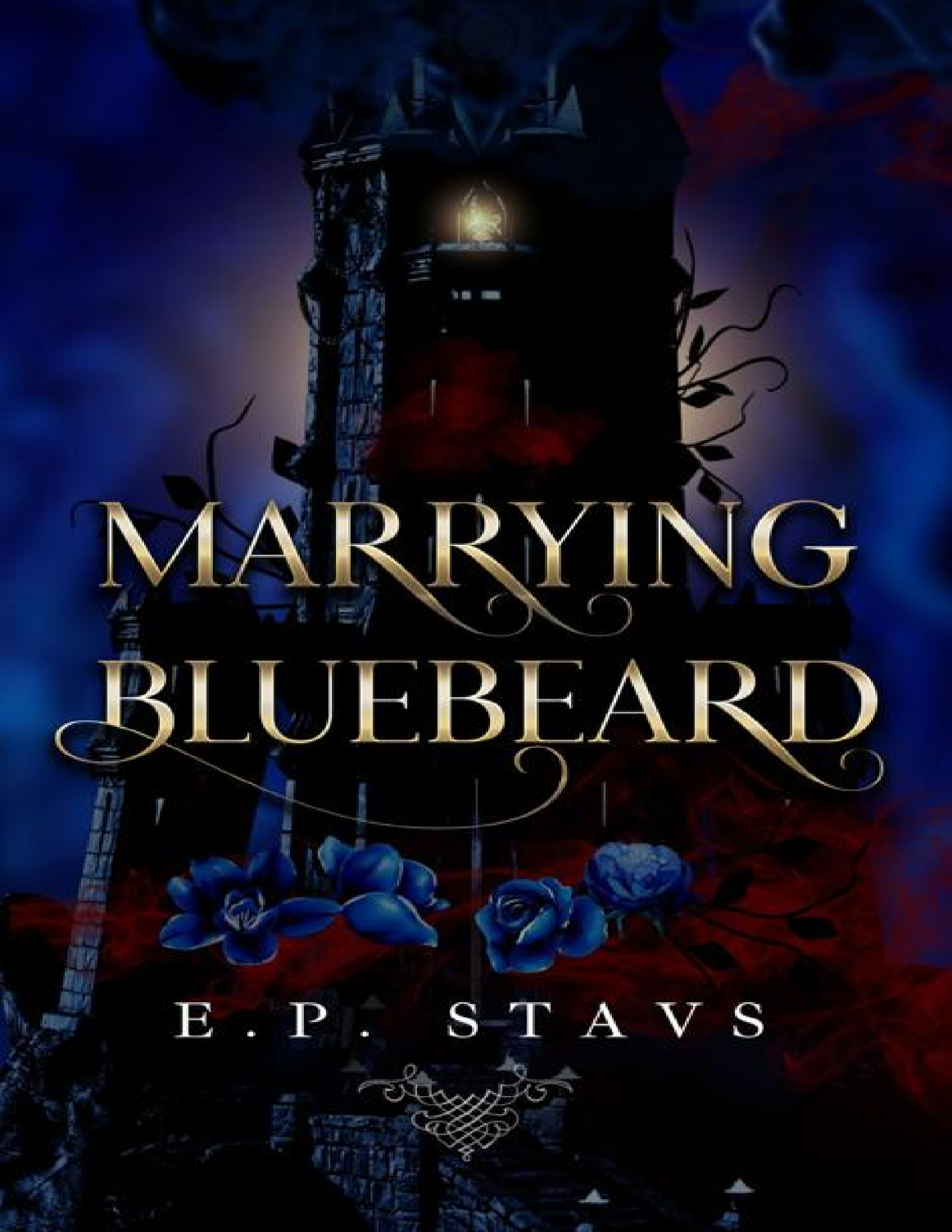
MARRYING
BLUEBEARD
E. P. STAVS

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For the readers who prefer their fairytales dark but still long for a happily ever after.

CONTENTS

Author's Note
Act One

1. Adelaide
2. Adelaide
3. Adelaide
4. Adelaide
5. Adelaide
6. Adelaide
7. Adelaide
8. Adelaide
9. Adelaide
10. Adelaide
11. Adelaide
12. Adelaide
13. Adelaide
14. Adelaide
15. Adelaide

Act Two

16. Adelaide
17. Adelaide
18. Adelaide
19. Adelaide
20. Adelaide
21. Adelaide
22. Adelaide

Act Three

23. Bertrand
24. Bertrand
25. Bertrand
26. Bertrand
27. Bertrand
28. Bertrand
29. Bertrand

Act Four

30. Adelaide
31. Bertrand
32. Adelaide
33. Bertrand
34. Bertrand
35. Adelaide

36. Bertrand
37. Adelaide
38. Bertrand
39. Adelaide
40. Adelaide
41. Bertrand
Chapter 42
Epilogue

Also by E.P. Stavs
Acknowledgments
About the Author

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Marrying Bluebeard is a dark, gothic romance and is intended for mature readers only. It contains scenes of explicit, consensual sex, strong language, self-harm, and gruesome imagery.

Act One

In which Adelaide falls for a mysterious, blue-bearded stranger.

1

ADELAIDE

There are days when life seems unbearably hard, and the weight of expectation hangs on you like a plague. When everyone wants something, but all you have left to offer is the rapidly thinning air in your lungs. Today is not one of those days.

But it's close.

"You shouldn't frown like that, Adelaide. You'll get wrinkles before you reach three-and-twenty." Marguerite nudges me with her foot from the other side of the carriage. "And goodness knows we only have room for one spinster in this family—me."

"You're hardly a spinster," I grumble, letting my gaze wander out the window. Our eldest brother, Julien, rides alongside us on his bay, a contented smile on his face. *I wish I were allowed to ride instead of being stuck in this cage like a rat.*

"And you're hardly a martyr," she retorts. "Although you certainly do a fair job of acting like one, what with all the moaning and sighing. I swear, it's all I've heard pass your lips for the last six hours. If it weren't for Julia waiting for me at home, I'd have leaped from the carriage ages ago."

"I haven't been that bad." I wrinkle my brow. "Have I?"

Marguerite sighs. "It hasn't been an easy ride, but I suppose I can't blame you overly much. Now that Julien's finally accepted Julia's and my relationship, all of his matchmaking hopes have landed on you. I can see why you'd be overwhelmed."

The fact that Julien has seen past society's disdain for anything different and used Marguerite's dowry to purchase a country cottage for my sister and her beloved Julia is one of his few redeeming qualities. Otherwise he tends to be overbearing and stuffy. Two of my least favorite attributes.

"There's an understatement," I mutter, cutting him another look through the window.

"Are you nervous about the house party?" Marguerite gives me a concerned look. "I know Julien has been especially adamant that you find a husband among the guests, and when he's set on something he can be quite—"

"Insufferable? Overwhelmingly tedious and pig-headed?"

Marguerite laughs. "I was thinking more along the lines of determined, but yes. Something like that."

"He's always hinted that he hoped I'd make a respectable match, but now, with Father's forgery scandal driving customers away left and right, he's desperate to save the company. And apparently he's got it in his head that if he can somehow bind me to an outstanding member of society, all of Father's mistakes will be forgotten. As if that would be enough," I scoff.

"He's not completely wrong," Marguerite points out. "The right match *could* make a difference. Just be sure it's one that makes you happy as well."

"And how exactly am I supposed to be happy, attaching myself to one of Julien's loathsome friends? They're absolutely tedious, aren't they, Whisper?" I scratch the bundle of white fur curled up in my lap between her ears, eliciting a contented purr in response.

Marguerite bites her lip. "Adelaide..."

"Hmm?"

"I know how important it is to be true to yourself, but..." She wrinkles her nose. "Maybe while we're there you could refrain from doing things like that? It's unnerving."

"First you complain about my frowning, now you don't even want me to pet my cat? What's next? Should I stop breathing?"

"Addie, please. Be serious."

"I am serious."

"You're petting a make-believe cat. How serious can you be?"

And there it is. The reason why their matchmaking schemes are ultimately doomed to fail. "Don't listen to her, Whisper," I coo, pretending

my sister's words don't bother me. That they don't drive a wedge of hurt and insecurity into my soul. "It's not her fault she can't see you." I narrow my eyes at Marguerite. "It is, however, her fault for refusing to listen each and every time I explain that you're not a figment of my imagination."

Marguerite groans in exasperation. "This again? Adelaide, I swear to god, there's nothing there. You haven't had a cat since you were ten, and that white fluff ball of yours fell into the river and drowned."

I was eight, actually. But that's beside the point. "Just because she died, doesn't mean she isn't here. Does it, Whisper?" I bend down to give her a kiss, and she mews in response.

"Adelaide." Marguerite leans forward, waiting for me to look up and meet her gaze. Her expression softens, but the determined glint in her eyes remains. "There are no such things as ghost cats. Or ghosts, for that matter. You have to let this obsession of yours go, or you're never going to find a husband worth having."

"A husband worth having would listen when I tell him the milliner's deceased wife is staring at us through the bedroom window," I retort. "And besides, who are you to lecture me on husbands? You don't even like men."

"That's different," Marguerite objects. "What I have with Julia is real. Not some desperate ploy for attention."

I jut my chin. "It's not a ploy."

"Do you really think I'm going to believe this rubbish?" Marguerite asks, looking exasperated. "You've been playing this weird game ever since Mama died, and I'm sick of it!"

Her voice fades into a low hum as I turn my head, gathering Whisper against my chest and blocking her out. It's a lecture I've heard before, and will undoubtedly hear again. Marguerite is a good sister, but her logical mind refuses to accept my strange abilities. My brothers—Julien, Tristan, and Darren—none of them have ever believed me, either, although they've certainly enjoyed teasing me about it. Not one living soul has ever truly accepted me as I am, not even my family.

Is it too much to ask that the man I marry does?

2

ADELAIDE

"You're here! Oh, my dear, darling girls. Look at you, all grown up and sophisticated." Madame Gossard flutters about as we step down from the carriage, her aging face lit with excitement.

Marguerite drops into a curtsy. "Madame Gossard, thank you so much for inviting us."

The older woman waves a hand in the air. "None of this Madame Gossard nonsense now. You're to call me Aunt Charlotte, and I won't hear a word otherwise."

"But we're not related." I look past our hostess to the massive estate sprawling behind her. *No, definitely not a relation of ours.* I think of our modest flat back in London with a wry grin. My father may have been born a baronet, but all the title came with was a pressing need to fit in among higher-ranking nobility. Given the fact he and my brothers all work for a living (or he did, before he was convicted of forging bank documents to impress potential business investors), this seems a futile feat. Personally, I'd rather cast the title aside and be done with it.

"Oh, but we are," Madame Gossard—that is, Aunt Charlotte—enthuses, drawing my attention back to the present. "In spirit," she adds, pressing her hands against her bosom. "Your mother and I were as good as sisters, which most certainly qualifies me for aunt status."

"I didn't know you and Mother were friends," Marguerite says in surprise. I lean forward eagerly. Our mother died from consumption when I was two, and I love hearing stories about her. The idea that this woman

might be a fresh source casts a whole new light on an otherwise dreaded event.

Aunt Charlotte hums. “The *best* of friends. The two of you take after her quite a bit.” Her gaze settles on my face, and there’s a knowing gleam in her eyes. “You in particular, Adelaide. I suspect you share several of your mother's attributes.”

Is she implying my mother could communicate with ghosts too? But no, she’s probably only referring to our physical appearance. She couldn’t know something like that at a glance. Whisper disappeared the moment we arrived, and holding her is my most obvious tell.

“I'm afraid you'll be sorely disappointed on that end.” The youngest of my brothers, Darren, hops down off his horse, the three of them just arriving. “Our mother was the toast of London when she was alive, and Adelaide...” He smirks. “Adelaide is simply toast.”

Our eldest brother, Julien, scowls as he dismounts. “Ignore the mannerless buffoon. I'm sure what he meant to say was it's a pleasure to be here.”

“I'm not one to let a little sibling cheekiness ruffle my feathers.” Aunt Charlotte holds her arms out expectantly. Julien is quick to comply, wrapping his arms around her.

“It's good to see you again,” he murmurs.

“It's been far too long, my sweet boy.” She pats his cheek and smiles at Darren and Tristan. “You're all so handsome and tall now, I can hardly believe it. Why, Darren was still wearing nappies the last time I saw you all together.”

“I believe he still is,” Tristan murmurs beneath his breath, earning a swift jab to the ribs from Darren. I snort, then try to disguise it with a cough.

Julien sighs. “Please forgive my siblings, Aunt Charlotte. They mean well, but their decorum can be a bit... lacking at times. We really do appreciate the invitation, and hopefully some time spent among higher society will smooth their rougher edges.”

“I'm sure they'll do just fine,” Aunt Charlotte says fondly. “Speaking of which, I'm eager for you to meet my other guests.” She slides her gaze my way and winks. “There are a number of intriguing prospects in attendance, and I plan to personally introduce each and every one of them to our Adelaide here.”

I balk. “Please don't...” Julien's eyes narrow in warning, and I swallow. “Go to too much trouble on my behalf,” I amend. “I'm sure you have a great deal to tend to as the hostess already.”

“Don't be silly.” Aunt Charlotte hooks our arms together and leads me down the walkway. “We old ladies live for matchmaking, you know.”

That's what I was afraid of. I hold back a grimace, my mouth curving upward in a wobbly smile.

“And what about you, Marguerite?” Aunt Charlotte hooks my sister with her other arm and pulls her along beside us. “What sort of gentleman would you be interested in meeting this week?”

Marguerite pales, and I smother a snicker as she shoots Julien a desperate look. “Me? But I-I'm much too old to be looking for a husband,” she stammers. “Really, I'm quite content.”

Aunt Charlotte gives her a long look before leaning in and whispering, “If it's a lady you'd prefer meeting, I'd be happy to arrange that too.”

Marguerite blushes. “Thank you, Aunt Charlotte.” A note of warmth colors her voice. “But I assure you, I have all the happiness I need at home.”

“Is that so?” Aunt Charlotte pats her hand. “Well, good for you then dear. I suppose I'll have to satisfy myself with finding a match for Adelaide. Unless, of course, any of your brothers are in the market for a wife?” she adds, raising her voice.

I don't even try to smother my laughter as all three of the Brindamour men begin talking at once, each of them coming up with a pressing matter to attend to.

Aunt Charlotte grins. “Looks like it's just us girls, then.”

3

ADELAIDE

Laughter is the last thing on my mind as I sit wedged between two loquacious gentlemen on the settee later that day. After baths and a short nap, Marguerite and I were hustled down to the parlor which was already full of people chatting and playing cards. I attempted to grab a place at the Whist table with Marguerite and Tristan, but Aunt Charlotte was having none of it. Which is how I ended up here, sandwiched between two men who may as well be carbon copies of each other for all the variety they offer.

Yes, the weather is fine today.

Madame Gossard is indeed a gracious hostess.

Tea? No, thank you. I'd prefer wine.

These starched-collar gentlemen are at least good for one thing—I have that glass of wine within moments. Thomas (or was it George?) all but thrusts it into my hand in his hurry to beat his friend to it. His friend (what *was* his name?) scowls over my head before pasting that overly familiar smile I'm beginning to detest back on his face.

"The wine is exquisite, is it not?" he simpers. "Madame Gossard only serves the absolute best at her functions."

I take another sip of the rich red blend, savoring the moment it runs over my tongue and keeps me from having to make more meaningless conversation. "Delicious," I agree, gaze wandering over his shoulder as I seek a means of escape.

On my other side, Thomas chimes in. “You're Madame Gossard's niece, isn't that right?” He eyes me with calculating admiration. “I imagine you've acquired quite the taste for finer things.” His friend hums in agreement.

Meaning they think I'm rich. I swallow a groan. *So they're not only insufferable bores but gold diggers to boot. Lovely.*

Tipping back my glass, I drain the rest of my wine in a single go. “No relation, actually. Now if you'll excuse me, gentlemen.” I indicate my empty glass and ignore their offers to fetch me another as I slip out from between them. Spotting a servant with a full tray, I exchange my drink with a grateful smile. “Bless you,” I murmur, taking a sip as I turn back to face the room.

Is it just me or has it suddenly gotten colder? I shiver, looking for signs of a rogue ghost wandering about, but none come to my attention. *Whisper isn't likely to visit me here*. *She hates crowds.* And yet, I can't deny there’s a distinct chill in the air. A murmur of hushed voices draws my attention to the parlor door. Given the way people's heads are craning, I’m not the only one to notice the sudden stir.

A new arrival? I stretch up on my tiptoes in hopes of catching a glimpse. *Damn these ladies and their passing fashions,* I grumble to myself, attempting to see around Lady Beckett's ridiculous hat. I’m about to skirt the room and try from another angle, when at last she moves to the side.

My breath catches.

How? How could a man at *this party* be so remarkably enticing? It’s impossible. But there he is, looming over the other gentlemen like a dark knight, his very presence oozing mystery and secret delights. I swallow, throat thick. *Are those blue streaks in his beard? How marvelously unique.* The stranger turns his head, and I find myself gazing into a pair of obsidian eyes.

My hand flutters to my chest, as if the slight pressure of my fingertips will be enough to steady the pounding of my heart. The stranger's lips twitch, and he raises a hand, tipping the brim of his top hat in my direction. Heat floods my cheeks as I stand there, glass in hand, my entire world spinning off course.

What is this impossible feeling?

I blink as a servant passes, obstructing my view. When it clears, I see the stranger has turned his attention elsewhere, and my stomach dips.

What's wrong with you? Getting emotional over some man you've never met? I scold myself. *Ridiculous.*

"Did you see him?"

I gasp as Marguerite appears at my elbow, face alight with excitement. I take a moment to calm myself. "See whom?" As if there could be any question to whom she is referring.

"The gentleman who just arrived," Marguerite whispers, hiding her face behind her fan. "His name is Bertrand de Montragoux, and from what I've heard, he has quite the infamous reputation. I'm shocked that Aunt Charlotte invited him."

I glance across the room, seeking him out. He's procured a glass of champagne and is chatting with Mary Dellum, of all people. The poor girl looks terrified. *He's just arrived and the first person he seeks out is a wallflower? How curious.* I push down the irrational spark of jealousy that creeps into my chest. *You don't even know him,* I remind myself. "Infamous? How so?"

"Well, his beard for one thing." My sister widens her eyes. "No one has hair that color naturally, Adelaide. He must dye it."

I shrug. "I've seen stranger fashion among the peacocks in London."

"True," Marguerite agrees. "But that's not all." She leans closer, her lips a breath away from my ear. "They say he's a widower," she whispers. "And no one knows how his first wife died, but there are rumors of foul play." She gives me a meaningful look. "If you catch my drift."

"Honestly Marguerite, are you implying Aunt Charlotte would invite a murderer to be a guest in her home?"

Marguerite bites her lip. "Well, no. Of course not."

"Exactly." I chance another glance in his direction. "I'm sure Monsieur de Montragoux is nothing more than a grieving widower looking for a second chance at love. He deserves our kindness, not our gossip."

"I suppose you're right." Marguerite sighs. "Just do me a favor, though, and don't go falling in love with him."

I choke on my wine. "What do you mean by that?"

"Please. I know you better than anyone. A mysterious stranger with a dark past? Not to mention that outrageous beard. I can practically see the drool forming at your lips."

I blush. "Well, excuse me for appreciating a spot of color among a sea of mundane."

“Appreciate all you like. Just be sure to leave it at that.” She nods toward one of the card tables where a seat has just opened up. “See that man there in the green vest?”

I eye the youthful gentleman skeptically, his mouth spread wide in a smile that accentuates the dimples in his cheeks. “The one who looks like he escaped the schoolroom to play among the adults? Is he even old enough to be here?”

Marguerite frowns. “He's four-and-twenty, Adelaide, not twelve. And a perfectly charming young man. He was in the same year at Eton as Tristan, and he's in line for a title. Respectable family, comfortable if not huge fortune. And I can personally attest to the fact that he is not a bore. So, do me a favor and give the poor boy a chance before you write him off, all right? He may not have a creepy blue beard, but who knows? Perhaps he reads tarot cards in his free time.”

I roll my eyes. “The beard isn't creepy, it’s dashing. But fine. I suppose a few rounds of Whist won't kill me—”

Marguerite is already pulling me toward the table before the words fully leave my mouth, cutting off another young lady who’s making a beeline for the open spot herself and practically shoving me into the seat. She smiles demurely around the table, as if she hasn't just manhandled her sister and almost trampled another woman.

“Everyone, this is my sister, Adelaide Brindamour. Adelaide, this Sir Edward Allen”—she indicates the older gentleman sitting to my left—“Lady Sarah Moore”—the middle-aged woman to my right—“and Lord Miles Harrison,” she finishes, beaming at the young man seated across from me whom she's clearly set her cap on as my future husband. Really, she’s awfully pushy for someone who made a point of staying true to herself when it comes to her own romances. If only Julia were here now to offer some distraction.

“It's nice to meet you.” I muster up a polite smile.

“Fair warning, she's an absolute shark when it comes to cards,” my sister adds. “So don't go easy on her.”

“A shark, eh?” Sir Edward chuckles, dealing the cards around the table. “Looks like Lady Sarah and I may have to up our game if we're to keep our winning streak.”

“My sister exaggerates, I assure you,” I laugh. “I'm really not that good at all.”

“You can't be worse than me.” Miles chuckles, giving me an apologetic smile. “I'm afraid you've been stuck with a rather dreadful partner. I've lost ten games so far and driven away almost as many partners with my ineptitude.”

“And yet you keep playing.” Amusement colors my voice as I follow Lady Sarah's lead with the queen of hearts.

Miles grins as I take the trick for our team. “Perhaps I was holding out for the right partner. I'm stubborn like that.”

“Well, here's hoping I can turn your luck around and finally get you that win.” I toss down another card.

“I doubt I could get any luckier than I am now.” His eyes shine with admiration as he looks over the top of his cards. “Partnered with the most enchanting young woman in attendance. Winning at cards would be superfluous at this point.”

I lift my cards to hide my face as I flush, Sir Edward's and Lady Sarah's chuckles only adding to the heat stinging my cheeks. “You shouldn't distract me with flattery,” I reply with a shaky laugh. “We're on the same team.” *And I doubt you'd be quite so enchanted if you knew all there was to know about me.*

A prickling at the back of my neck draws my attention away from the table, turning my head to the corner of the room as if by command. A lone figure studies me over the top of a silver flask. He tips it back, his eyes never breaking contact. I stare boldly back, ignoring the shiver creeping its way up my spine. *And what about you, Monsieur de Montragoux? What would you think if you knew?*

The flask lowers, disappearing inside his jacket, and he holds my gaze a beat longer before turning his attention to a bespectacled young woman who seems determined to worry a hole in the fabric of her dress. I frown as his face breaks into a smile, the darkness that clung to his presence a moment earlier dissipating as he makes small talk with the mousy girl.

Not mousy, pretty, I correct, instantly ashamed of my petty thoughts. *Jealousy doesn't suit you, Adelaide, and besides—he’s just another man, same as the others. Who cares if he smiles your way or not? They all turn away in the end.*

4

ADELAIDE

"I saw you playing cards with Lord Harrison last night. It looked like the two of you were getting on nicely." Julien peers into the mirror, a comb in his hand as he checks his immaculately groomed hair for the five-hundredth time since arriving in Marguerite's and my room this morning.

I stroke Whisper's fur as I stare out the window, waiting for him to finish. I've been dressed and ready to go for over an hour now, but he insisted on escorting me despite the fact that I can see Marguerite and my two other brothers out on the lawn, mingling among the other guests.

"Well? What did you think of him?"

"Think of whom?" I cast my gaze about the chatting group. Was that a flash of blue? Ah, just a necktie.

"Of Lord Harrison, of course. Are you even listening to me?" The exasperation in Julien's voice pulls my attention away from crowd watching. He scrubs a hand over his face. "And would you please stop doing that? You look absurd."

The wedge drives a little deeper.

I flex my hand, forcing it to keep moving as I fake an air of innocence. "Stop doing what?"

"Petting your imaginary cat," he hisses, eyes darting toward the door as if afraid someone might be standing outside with their ear pressed to it. Heaven forbid anyone catch a whiff of his sister's shameful secret.

I lift Whisper flush with my face and plant a kiss on her delicate, gray nose. It used to be pink once upon a time, but apparently ghosts aren't too keen on color. “You're not imaginary, are you darling?”

“Adelaide, please!” Julien's normally even temper snaps, and I feel a smidgen of remorse over my teasing. He really has been under a lot of stress lately. I release Whisper onto the bed and fold my hands behind my back, attempting to look contrite.

“Lord Harrison was a perfect gentleman,” I recite, forcing myself not to glance out the window in search of a particular blue beard. I try to come up with something else to say about the young man, but aside from his ridiculous flattery, I can't recall much about him.

“I'm glad to hear it.” Some of the tension eases from Julien’s posture. He holds out his arm, and I obediently place my hand in the crook of his elbow. “He's in excellent standing among the business class and has some truly envious connections. A good word from him would go a long way toward clearing the stain our father left on the company's reputation.”

My smile is paper thin as he leads me through the doorway, and if I drag a bit, can I really be blamed? My brother would have me marry simply to secure a good word for his business. Well, I have a few choice words for him if he thinks I'd trade my future away so easily.

Not bloody likely.

The outing Madame Gossard has arranged for the morning is a trip to the ruins of Prospect Abbey, where a picnic will be laid out upon our arrival. A line of carriages awaits, but to my surprise (and excitement), she's remembered my love of horses and arranged for me to ride along with a dozen or so of the others. I grin up at Julien, who looks torn as to whether he should consent to my riding or insist that I go in the carriages.

“There are other ladies riding.” I plead with my eyes for him not to make a fuss. “It'll be fine.”

“It's not the other ladies I'm worried about,” he grumbles.

“Oh, come on. I smiled and played nice over cards last night, didn't I? Let me have this, please.”

He frowns. “I don't know...”

“Aunt Charlotte will be offended if I snub her arrangements.” And then, in a last-ditch effort to secure his agreement, I add, “Lord Harrison is riding. Perhaps we'll get an opportunity to converse some more.” *Anything to keep me out of those stuffy carriages.*

Julien's gaze flicks to where Lord Harrison holds the reins of a sleek, brown bay, and I know I've won. “No racing.” He gives me a stern look. “Or jumping. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, yes, I hear you. Anything that seems like fun, don't do it.” I’m tempted to give him a mock salute but hold back for fear it'd earn me a place in the carriages. And it’s far too fine a day for that. He purses his lips, looking for all the world as if he’s about to launch into another lecture, but something over my shoulder draws his attention.

“Who is that talking to Marguerite?”

I turn, seeking out my sister and raise my brows in surprise when I spy the tall, blue-bearded gentleman conversing with her. “I believe that's Monsieur de Montragoux. Did you not meet him last night during cards?”

“I spent most of the evening in the billiards room with Lord Hefnor talking business.” His eyes narrow as he watches my sister's mouth pull into a rare smile upon something the man says. I feel a twinge of regret that I can’t hear what they’re saying. “I don't care for that beard,” he adds. “It's positively licentious.”

“Licentious?” I laugh. “What could possibly be licentious about facial hair?”

“It's unnatural for a beard to be that blue.” Julien’s eyes dart about as he lowers his voice to a hushed whisper. “Any man who would dye it as such is obviously perverse and certainly no gentleman. I can only imagine Aunt Charlotte was unaware of it when she invited him here.”

I roll my eyes but refrain from commenting. I learned long ago that arguing with Julien is a waste of breath. Best to simply ignore him. Together we watch Monsieur de Montragoux help Marguerite into one of the waiting carriages. Julien sighs with relief when he doesn’t follow her in but rather heads to where those riding horseback are gathered.

“Well,” Julien huffs. “Let's hope that's the end of that. The last thing we need is another scandal, and mark my words—that man is a scandal waiting to happen. Now come, I see Lord Harrison has secured a mount for you. Let's not keep him waiting.”

“How do you know it's for me?” I turn to look in the direction he’s gesturing. The answer is clear, however, the moment I spy him, his eager eyes locked on me as he walks toward us, a set of reins in each hand. He bows to my brother, who gives him an approving smile before spiriting away, leaving the two of us alone.

“You're as lovely as ever this morning, Miss Brindamour,” Miles states.

“And you’re as full of flattery.” I nod toward the horses. “Is one of those for me?”

“Ah yes. Madame Gossard said you were quite the horsewoman, so I made sure to secure a match worthy of your skill.” He holds out the reins to a beautiful, brown thoroughbred. “Sir Lancelot, at your service.”

“A knight are you?” I take the reins and rub the horse’s nose as he sniffs my hand. “You’re certainly dashing enough.” Lord Harrison cups his hands, and I place the tip of my boot in them as I swing up and onto Lancelot’s back. Julien will be furious, but I simply can’t abide riding sidesaddle. My skirts are long enough that only a glimpse of ankle peeks out, and anyway, it’s not as if we’re in town. Summer house parties are nothing if not casual.

Or so I like to pretend. The farce keeps me sane.

I maneuver Lancelot around as Lord Harrison mounts his own horse, and soon we’re on our way, crossing the sprawling green field and passing the lake with its mirrored surface. The sun isn’t hot enough to make me sweat yet, but I enjoy the breeze as it cools my cheeks all the same. Lifting my face, I breathe it all in. There’s a flash of blue in my periphery, and I glance to my left to find Monsieur de Montragoux watching me as he rides a few horses over. I grin, tossing my dark curls as I face forward and dig in my heels.

“Last one to the abbey is a stinky peacock.”

Lord Harrison laughs as he chases after me, but it’s the low chuckle that I know without looking belongs to *him* that sends me flying.

5

ADELAIDE

The grounds around the abbey are laid out with blankets and a long table has been filled to the brim with meats, cheeses, fruits, nuts, and tiny, crustless sandwiches. Servants pass around fluted glasses of lemonade, and I take one gratefully, cheeks flushed from the ride. Thank goodness the carriages have yet to arrive, as Julien would have been apoplectic at the sight of me galloping in. (Never mind that I was in first place, with Monsieur de Montragoux only a beat behind.)

"Shall we?" Lord Harrison offers me his arm as he nods toward the buffet table, and I can't think of a good reason to refuse. Honestly, I am hungry, and the other gentlemen are already lining up along with the handful of ladies who chose to ride. All except one, that is. I notice Monsieur de Montragoux has taken refuge under a nearby tree, where he sips from a silver flask. I wonder what he's drinking. Julien favors port, while Tristan and Darren prefer whiskey. I, myself, have only been allowed to have wine, and watered-down wine at that. I imagine Monsieur de Montragoux drinks something daring, like absinthe.

I wonder if he'd offer me a taste, should I be bold enough to ask.

Lord Harrison insists on filling a plate for me, despite the fact that I tell him I'm more than capable of carrying two things at a time. It should annoy me, but he's so sweet and sincere that I allow it. Fortunately, he listens when I tell him what I do and don't like, and I find myself with a satisfactory spread by the time we settle onto a nearby blanket.

Just in time for the carriages to arrive.

Julien helps Marguerite and Aunt Charlotte out of the first one, his eyes seeking me out with uncanny precision. I resist the urge to smooth my hair, praying I've done an adequate job of fixing the errant strands after the ride. Of course, if either Tristan or Darren decide to open their big mouths about my less-than-ladylike performance, it'll be a wasted effort.

"Not a hair out of place. He'll never know," Lord Harrison whispers, winking when I throw him a startled look. He sips his lemonade, looking pleased at having figured me out.

I laugh, lifting my own glass. "Here's to keeping it that way."

"My lips are sealed."

Julien and Marguerite soon join us at our blanket, and the conversation turns to politics, and more importantly, how some upcoming changes will affect the business scene. I tune them out, allowing my gaze to roam over the ruins. A large portion of the abbey remains intact, and I'm not at all surprised to see a wisp of white slide past one of the upper windows. A place like this is bound to have its share of ghosts.

"Has anyone told you the story behind this place?" Lord Harrison asks, taking me by surprise. I turn to see Julien has wandered off to chat with Lord Hefner. Typical.

"No." I look back up at the crumbling stone building. "I take it you're familiar with it?"

"I've heard a few versions over the years." He sets his glass aside as he stands and offers me his hand. "It's a story best told while exploring the area in question," he adds, a challenge in his eyes. "Unless, of course, you're afraid it's haunted?"

I know it's haunted. "Are you sure it's safe?" I eye the structure doubtfully.

"Perfectly safe," he insists. "I grew up not too far from here, and sneaking into the abbey at night was basically a rite of passage for any boy under the age of twelve."

"I suppose…" I allow him to help me up, eyes fixed on the window where I'd seen the ghost pass by. Would it be insulted by our presence? Or pleased? I certainly wasn't looking to offend any lingering spirits.

Marguerite catches my wrist, her voice low as she whispers, "You can't go in there alone, Adelaide. It wouldn't be proper."

Aha! An out. "Come with us, then," I suggest, knowing she'll decline. I'm not sure I particularly want to go, either.

She bites her lip, glancing at Lord Harrison as he waits patiently to the side. Her expression takes a determined slant, and I bite back a groan. Of course, she grows a backbone now of all times. She must really want to see me with Lord Harrison if she's willing to traipse through creepy old ruins with us. "All right." She brushes the wrinkles free of her skirt as she rises. "I will."

Drat. Looks like I'll have to be the one to back out after all. I hate looking weak, but waltzing through a sea of spirits who may or may not be malevolent is far less appealing. I try to come up with a good excuse not to go when a voice behind my shoulder interrupts my thoughts.

"I couldn't help but overhear the three of you planning to explore the ruins. Do you mind if I join you?"

My heart stutters at the smooth baritone, delicious shivers running down my back. It's him.

"Not at all." Lord Harrison grins amicably at the man looming behind me. "The more the merrier." He holds out his arm for me, and I bite back a frown as I take it with trembling fingers. I don't dare turn my head to look at Monsieur de Montragoux for fear my cheeks are as flushed as they feel. *What is this effect he has on me?* I swallow. I can't explain it, but I don't entirely hate it, either. It's—my lips curve into a slow smile—rather thrilling, actually.

I hold my breath as he moves past, the sleeve of his jacket brushing my arm. I lift my gaze as he steps in front of Marguerite and crooks his elbow. After a moment of hesitation, she takes it.

I have never been so envious.

"Well then," Lord Harrison says, unaware of my tumultuous state as he leads us toward the ruins. "Allow me to tell you all the story of Sister Mercy and the abbot of Prospect Abbey."

6

ADELAIDE

"This is the nave—a shared space for both the nuns who dwelled in the west wing with the abbess and the monks who lived in the east wing under the abbot." Lord Harrison leads us through an opening on the west side of the building. Blackened arches line the sides of the open room, and sunlight streams down from the large gaps in the ceiling. I shiver as we make our way through it. The temperature has already dropped, and I've yet to see any of the abbey's ghostly residents.

"And this"—he hops up onto a raised platform at the front—"is the high altar where the abbot gave his sermons." He raises a brow, looking around our group. "But the heart of the story takes place up there." He points to a set of stairs winding out of sight off to the side. "In the abbot's personal chambers." A pause. "Shall we?"

"I don't know." Marguerite bites her lip as she glances back at me. "Maybe we'd better not. It could be dangerous."

I want to agree with her, to insist that we turn around and rejoin the picnic, but Monsieur de Montragoux is already heading for the darkened stairwell. I know it's foolish, but for some reason I don't want him to think I'm scared.

"I'm sure Lord Harrison wouldn't have suggested it if it wasn't completely safe." I adopt an air of nonchalance as I follow in Monsieur de Montragoux's footsteps. He glances over his shoulder, the corner of his mouth inching up.

“And if it’s not?” His dark eyes spark with a sudden challenge. “Would you still be willing to go?”

I clutch the fabric of my skirts, but my voice remains cool and calm. “I guess we’ll see, won’t we?” I brush past him, heat prickling the back of my neck as I feel his gaze follow me up the stairs. I’m vaguely aware of Lord Harrison and Marguerite, the sound of their voices close behind, but it’s the soft catch of his breath that fills my ears. My heart trips a rapid staccato, amplifying with each step I take.

A flutter of white darts out of sight as I reach the second-floor landing, and I pause. The chill that greets me in the long hallway nips at my cheeks while an opposing heat spreads through my back. I can feel him behind me, close but not touching, and I have the strangest urge to lean back against his chest.

Get ahold of yourself, Adelaide. Good gracious, he’s just another man, same as all the others.

Nothing special.

“What is it?” His breath skirts my ear as he peers over my shoulder. “Did you see something?”

If I said yes, would he think me crazy? Somehow, I don’t believe he would. “No, nothing.” I move into the hallway, making room for him to pass as I wait for the other two to join us. “Well?” I tilt my head in Lord Harrison’s direction. “Will you tell us the story here, or must we go to the room itself?”

Lord Harrison grins. “I never do things by halves. To the chambers we go!”

His boyish enthusiasm eases the tension in my shoulders, and I can’t help a soft laugh as I follow him down the hall.

Marguerite clasps my arm, pulling me into her side as we walk. “Do you… see anything?” she whispers, eyes darting about nervously.

A translucent face peeks through a crack in one of the doors as we pass, and I can hear them humming a discordant tune under their breath. I place a hand over Marguerite’s as I try not to stare at the lurking apparition. “I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts?”

Her fingers dig into my arm. “I don’t, in theory… but this place could very well change my mind.”

“I’m sure it’s perfectly safe.” Still, I hurry her along, putting distance between us and the specter. So long as they’re content to watch, we’ll be

fine.

Lord Harrison stops and turns to face us as he stands before an ornately carved door at the end of the hallway. “Sister Mercy was fifteen when she entered the abbey as a prospective nun, taking her vows upon her sixteenth birthday. Often compared to a ray of sunshine, she was a favorite among the other nuns, as well as the abbot, himself. So it was no small shock when, two years after joining, she was caught bloody-handed over the abbot’s corpse.” His eyes widen dramatically as the door swings open behind him. “In this very room.”

A pair of icy blue eyes stare back at me from the center of the stripped room, blonde curls falling loose down the girl’s nightgown as she hovers above the floor. Streaks of red stain her hands and a bruise discolors her neck.

“They say she stabbed him in his sleep.” Lord Harrison steps aside as Monsieur de Montragoux strolls in, hands clasped behind his back as he looks around. Marguerite stays at my side, her grip on my arm growing painfully tight. “Twenty times with a knife stolen from the kitchen. He never even had a chance to call out for help.”

The blonde apparition cocks her head, gaze fixed upon mine. She knows I can see her. They always do. “He’s wrong,” she says. “His screams were piercing. The others only pretended not to hear.”

My lips part to ask why, but I close them just in time, recalling who I’m with. Monsieur de Montragoux raises an eyebrow, a curious gleam in his eyes.

“Sister Mercy was hung for murder, and the abbey shut down not long afterward, with each new abbot leaving within a month of arrival.” Lord Harrison’s grin stretches as he looks around. “And do you know why?”

The answer is staring me in the face—literally—but I keep my mouth shut as he finishes with a dramatic, “Because her ghost remains, waiting to attack anyone who dares enter.”

Marguerite lets out a squeak, releasing my arm as she stumbles backward. “No, no, no. We shouldn’t be here.” And then she’s running down the hall with a laughing Lord Harrison chasing after her, assuring her that we’re completely safe, that it’s just a silly ghost story.

Monsieur de Montragoux gives me the slightest hint of a smile. “Do you not believe in ghosts, Miss Brindamour?”

“I do, actually.” My gaze is fixed on the one hovering before me. Despite her stained hands and the gruesome story, I’m not getting a murderous vibe from her. In fact, something about her makes me want to give her a hug. I take a step forward, and the ghost blinks in surprise.

“He was hurting them,” she says, and my heart aches at the lingering pain in her voice. “He tried to hurt me too.” Her hand twitches. “He wasn’t expecting me to fight back.”

I can’t help it—I answer her. “I’m glad you did. May the bastard rot in hell.”

Her face breaks into a smile, and a soft glow of glittering light surrounds her. “Thank you.” Her visage fades in the light. “He is.”

And then she’s gone, and I’m alone with Monsieur de Montragoux. Worry gnaws at my gut as I wait for him to comment on my strange behavior—will it be mocking? Or scornful? *What must he think of me? Talking to the air. He must think I’ve lost my wits.*

When I gather the nerve to meet his gaze, however, it isn’t censure that I find there. It’s interest. Rapt, unyielding interest.

He steps forward, positioning himself in the very spot that Sister Mercy disappeared from, and holds out his arm. “Shall we head back?”

No mention of my strange words. No remark about the lights that I’m certain he saw too. I find myself hesitating, confused by his lack of response, but then he winks.

And suddenly we’re conspirators, and Sister Mercy is the secret we share, just us two.

My chest swells with anticipation as I take his arm. Perhaps this house party isn’t the worst thing in the world after all.

7

ADELAIDE

"I can't believe I let Lord Harrison talk us into entering those ruins. My opinion of him is rapidly decreasing." Marguerite shivers. "Although I suppose a stunt like that would only raise him in your esteem." I brush crimson paint across my lips, and she wrinkles her nose at me in the mirror. "Too bold."

I purse my lips, admiring the dark hue. I think it makes me look daring. "I like it."

Marguerite shakes her head, but she knows better than to argue. "One thing's for sure. You and Monsieur de Montragoux looked thick as thieves coming out of the ruins arm in arm. I thought Julien would have a fit when he saw you." She smirks. "Lord Harrison didn't look too happy, either."

"Oh please." I fix a rogue smudge of paint before turning in my seat and giving her a look. "It was perfectly respectable. And besides, he dropped me as soon as we returned to the blanket. Spent the rest of the afternoon doting on Miss Dellum."

"Someone sounds jealous."

"Not jealous. Merely pointing out that Julien has nothing to worry about. Monsieur de Montragoux has no interest in me as a potential bride."

"If you say so," Marguerite sighs. "And honestly, I hope you're right. While I'll admit he's polite and less intimidating in person than at first glance, there's something about him that unsettles me. And it isn't just his beard," she adds, seeing the retort forming on my lips.

“Well, whatever it is, it matters not.” I stand, taking Marguerite’s hand in mine. “You’ve got your Julia, and I’ve got a brother who won’t rest until I’m engaged to a *respectable* gentleman. And we both have a dinner to get to, unless you fancy walking in late? I know how you love making an entrance.”

“Oh yes.” Marguerite rolls her eyes. “You know me so well.”

“Don’t I, though?” I link our arms together as we make our way to the dining room. Almost everyone has been seated, with a single notable exception—Monsieur de Montragoux has yet to arrive. He enters as I stand in the doorway, the subtle spice of his aftershave alerting me to his presence. Every nerve in my body is alive as he passes.

A pinch on my side, and I turn to find Marguerite searing me with a look. She nods toward the table, where a footman waits behind a chair. Waiting, it would seem, for me. I manage a weak smile as Marguerite and I part ways and slip into my chair, taking a quick peek to see where Monsieur de Montragoux’s been placed. Not that I care. I’m just curious.

Beside Miss Dellum. How lovely. I hope they have a delightful chat.

Honestly, I couldn’t care less.

But what could they possibly be talking about? I don’t think I’ve ever heard her utter more than a few words at a time. She’s certainly a rapt listener, though. Practically hanging onto his every word. Why does he keep leaning in like that? She’s blushing!

“Is the soup not to your liking?”

“What?” I startle at Lord Harrison’s voice, and it’s only then that I realize a bowl of gazpacho has been placed in front of me. “Oh.” I dip my spoon in the cold, red soup and take a sip. “Very nice,” I murmur, even as my gaze yearns to veer left.

“You seem distracted tonight.” Lord Harrison glances down the table where Monsieur de Montragoux is apparently wowing Miss Dellum with some thrilling tale or another, given her doe-eyed expression. “I hope our excursion through the ruins wasn’t too overwhelming. I’d hate to think I exhausted you on your second day here. Especially since we only have three left before Madame Gossard shoos us away,” he adds with a light chuckle.

“Five days does seem rather short.” I take a sip of wine, forcing myself to relax and focus on the gentleman next to me. The man my family would

have me marry. I should at least try to get to know him. “Will you be returning to London afterward?”

“I’m afraid so. As much as I’d love to extend my escape in the country, business calls. I imagine your brother is in the same boat.”

“It does seem to be all-consuming,” I agree. “Frankly, I’m surprised he found time for this.”

“Such is the life of a businessman.” He grins. “Though in truth, I can’t imagine living any other way.”

“A titled gentleman who openly admits a love for business?” I smile over the rim of my glass. “That makes you a bit of a novelty around here, I expect. Most gentlemen would rather sell off their daughters than be seen dabbling in trade.”

“I pride myself in *not* being most gentlemen.” Lord Harrison winks, but his expression is sincere. “Despite my drive to succeed, it’s my family that comes first. And should I be so fortunate as to find myself wed, I would make my wife’s happiness a priority. I can promise you that.”

It’s not a proposal, but the implication couldn’t be clearer—he’s interested. Very interested, if the look on his face is anything to go by. I fight the urge to squirm, and my gaze darts to the left.

Monsieur de Montragoux is watching us through hooded eyes, his expression shuttered.

My mouth is dry. I sip my wine, but it doesn’t help. “That’s…” I’ve already forgotten what I was going to say. *Why is he looking at me like that? What is he thinking?* I touch my fingers to my forehead, turning my attention back to Lord Harrison with a grimace. “Sorry. I seem to be coming down with a headache. If you’ll excuse me, I think I’d best retire for the evening.”

“Of course.” He hurries to stand and pull my chair back for me. “You must lie down and rest if you’re not feeling well.”

“Thank you.” I chance one last glance back at the table. Monsieur de Montragoux has turned back to Miss Dellum, and he doesn’t look up as I excuse myself, not even when Miss Dellum herself looks over with a smile.

Part of me wishes to scream for him to look at me, but the greater part hates how pathetic it makes me feel. Never have I let a man turn me around like this, and without his even trying. Good god, the poor man is simply talking to his assigned dinner partner. I lift my chin as I make my exit. From

here on out, I'll pay him no mind. I'm sure there are other gentlemen who'd be unfazed by my ability. He can't be the only one.

Can he?

8

ADELAIDE

"Victorious again!" Lord Harrison beams as he lifts my hand into the air, striking a triumphant pose. "Who dares take us on next?"

Lord Davenport wipes his forehead with a silk handkerchief. "You've trounced us at lawn bowls enough for one morning. A cold glass of lemonade sounds far more appealing."

"Very well, run away if you must," Lord Harrison teases. "I suppose Miss Brindamour and I will have to find another pair of challengers willing to take on our prowess."

"Actually, lemonade sounds lovely." I fan myself as I look around the manicured lawns. "And besides, I do believe we've already played everyone here." It certainly feels as if we have. Lord Harrison secured me as a partner the moment my sister and I stepped outside this morning, and we've been at it ever since. While his enthusiasm has a certain charm, his doggedness is borderline exhausting.

"Not so." Miles gestures toward a copse of trees where Monsieur de Montragoux and Miss Dellum talk animatedly over a shared book. I try to read the title, but it's obscured in the folds of Miss Dellum's skirts. "We have yet to challenge those two. What do you say?"

I'd rather eat raw garlic.

"Tempting, but this sun is getting a bit strong. I think perhaps I'll step inside for a while to cool down." I lower my voice. "You should know, Lord Harrison, that ladies are meant to glow, not glisten." I wave my fan with an exaggerated grimace.

“Please, call me Miles. We’re a champion lawn bowls team now, after all.”

I hesitate. If I use his given name, will he consider that encouragement for something more than friendship? His expression is so open and sincere, however, I find myself smiling. “All right, Miles. And you may feel free to call me Adelaide, at least while we’re in the countryside. I doubt my brother would approve of such informalities in London.”

“Adelaide for a few days it is.” Miles holds out his arm. “May I escort you up to the house?”

“Oh no, please. Stay.” I desperately need a moment to myself. “I believe Miss Farthington was looking for a shuttlecock partner.” I nod toward the young lady currently chatting with Marguerite.

Miles appears visibly torn. I don’t think I’ve ever met someone as enthused about lawn games before, but he also seems determined to remain at my side. I suspect Julien has been whispering in his ear when I’m not around, building me up as the ideal prospect. Hopefully my acceptance of given names won’t make things worse. “If you’re sure…”

It’s all the opening I need. “Absolutely.” I inch toward the manor. “Have fun.” I practically jog back up to the porch, snagging a glass of lemonade from the table before slipping inside. I make my way to the orangery, where I can appreciate the beautiful day without having to converse with anyone. Its view of the trees where Monsieur de Montragoux and Miss Dellum are ensconced is entirely unrelated.

As it turns out, however, the orangery is occupied when I arrive. Streaks of colored light refracting from the cut glass window pass through the young girl perched atop a wrought-iron table. She looks longingly out the window as she watches a group playing croquet.

Smothering a sigh, I take a seat beside the table and fold my hands in my lap as I follow her gaze. “Did you like to play?” I watch Miss Talbot giggle as her ball goes wide of the wicket. She simpers as Lord Brinkley offers to help with her form, and it’s all I can do not to groan. Such an obvious ploy.

The girl looks up in surprise. “Are you talking to me?”

I glance over with a bemused smile. “Is there anyone else here?”

She looks around in confusion. “No, but… you can see me?”

“I would think that obvious.”

Her pale eyes grow wide. “Most people can’t.” A grin stretches across her face. “My name’s Jenny. What’s yours?”

“Adelaide.” I offer her a smile before returning my attention outside. The croquet game is still in full swing, but I notice Miss Dellum has joined a group of older ladies armed with parasols who are headed down toward the lake. Monsieur de Montragoux is nowhere in sight. “Tell me, Jenny. Were you a croquet girl? Or was lawn bowls more your style?”

She sighs, shoulders drooping. “Neither. Mother died when I was six, and Father wouldn’t let me leave the house for fear I’d fall ill like she did.” She leans forward, reaching her hand toward the window, and her translucent fingers press against the glass. “Even now I can’t seem to go outside. He kept me in to keep me safe, and now I’m a spirit bound to this wretched house for eternity.”

I shudder. “That sounds dreadful.”

“Dreadful is an understatement.” Another long sigh. “At least the woman who lives here now, Madame Gossard, is more entertaining than the last owner. She has all sorts of interesting guests. Like you.” She perks up as she looks me over. “Have you always been able to see ghosts?”

“For as long as I can remember. In fact”—I make a clucking noise with my tongue and a moment later a ball of white fur appears out of thin air before jumping onto my lap—“this is my cat, Whisper. She’s a ghost too.”

Jenny squeals, bouncing off the table and coming around to my side. She reaches out, tentatively scratching between Whisper’s ears. When her wispy fingers make contact, she beams. “I can feel her. Her fur is so soft and fluffy!”

Whisper soaks up the attention, rubbing her head against Jenny’s eager hand. “She likes you.”

“Aw, I like you too, Whisper.” Jenny giggles as Whisper rolls onto her back and stretches out. “I can’t believe there are two people at this party who can see ghosts. That never happens.”

My heart kicks up, and I try to keep my expression neutral. “Oh? Is there someone else here who can see you?”

Jenny nods. “The man with the funny blue beard.” She blushes. “He caught me spying on a couple having a romantic moment in the garden last night after dinner. Told me even little ghosts need to respect people’s privacy.”

“He’s right.”

“It’s rare, but I manage it every now and then.”

I gasp, and turn to find Monsieur de Montragoux smirking at us from the doorway.

“I see the two of you have met. But who is this little fur ball?” He strolls across the room and bends down, offering his hand for Whisper to smell. She gives it a cautious sniff, claws digging in my lap as her tail puffs out.

He grimaces. “Cats and I don’t get along. I suspect they know I’m a dog person at heart.”

I smooth a hand over Whisper’s back, attempting to calm her, but she refuses to settle. With a hiss in Monsieur de Montragoux’s direction, she hops down and disappears.

“I don’t think she likes you, Mr. Bertrand,” Jenny giggles, covering her mouth with her hand.

He clutches his heart in mock despair. “Yet another lady frightened away before I have a chance to prove myself.”

“This is a common occurrence, is it?” I smooth my skirts as I stand, and repress the urge to flutter my lashes as our eyes meet.

He smiles. “The curse of being different, I’m afraid.”

“A feeling I’m well acquainted with.” I glance back and forth between him and Jenny. “Although never one I’ve been able to share before now.” Curiosity mixes with anticipation, tying my tongue into knots as I attempt to put words to one of the myriad questions welling up inside me. “Have you… that is, how long have you been able to…?”

“See ghosts?” He winks at Jenny, who giggles in return.

A thrill unlike any I’ve ever felt rushes through me, leaving me breathless. Hearing it voiced like that, without the accompanying frown or worried concern—it’s exhilarating.

I exhale a laugh of my own. “Yes, exactly that.”

“How long…” He sighs, his expression growing serious. “It feels like a hundred years or more.”

My heart squeezes at the pain underlining his words. I’m all too familiar with the burden this ability brings; the looks and whispers that follow when you forget to hide it. Not to mention dealing with the apparitions, themselves. The friendly ones like Jenny and Whisper are few and far between.

I touch the edge of his sleeve. “It’s a difficult thing, seeing what others can’t.”

He glances down at my hand. “Sometimes.” When he looks up, my breath catches at the glimmer of heat kindling in his obsidian eyes. “But sometimes the secret is worth it, when it leads you to someone special.”

A flush creeps its way up my chest and neck, and warmth pools in my cheeks. “Like Jenny?”

The corner of his mouth pulls upward. “She’s one example.”

My gaze drops, drawn to the enticing upturn of his lips. I wonder what his beard would feel like if I were to kiss them?

“You’re blushing,” he murmurs.

I swallow, forcing myself to look away as I draw my hand back. “I was in the sun too long.”

“Ah yes. Lawn bowls with Lord Harrison. You two made quite the triumphant showing.”

“I’m surprised you noticed. You and Miss Dellum looked far too engrossed with your book to pay attention to our silly little games.”

His dark eyes flash as I glance his way. “It would seem we both noticed more than we let on.”

“Apparently so,” I murmur, heart pounding as he sways toward me. He hasn’t moved, and yet he’s closer than he was a moment ago. A single step and we’ll be touching.

“Oooh, you two look just like that couple in the garden last night.” Jenny’s voice is a splash of cold water, reminding me we’re not as alone as we may appear, and Monsieur de Montragoux smiles ruefully as he takes a step back.

“My apologies, Miss Brindamour.” He tips his hat. “It wasn’t my intention to place you in a compromising position.”

Call me Adelaide. The words lodge in my throat. “No harm done, Monsieur.”

A shadow passes over his face, and he takes another step back. “And none will be. If you’ll excuse me.” He turns on his heel and is through the door in a few long strides.

I gaze after him. “What a peculiar man.”

“If you think he’s odd, you should see his valet. Now there’s a strange fellow if ever I saw one. He’s like a mute bulldog with a sun aversion.”

I chuckle softly. “I’d like to see that.”

“Keep your eyes sharp, and you will. He’s always skulking about in the shadows. Gives me the shivers.”

“A shivering ghost,” I muse. “Now there’s something you don’t see every day.” I give her a teasing grin. “Shouldn’t you be giving *him* the shivers?”

Jenny folds her arms, sticking her lip out in a pout. “Not all ghosts are scary, you know.”

“You’re absolutely right. My apologies.” I hold out my hand. “Still friends?”

Her cold fingers wrap around mine, giving my hand a firm shake. “Friends.” Her face lights up. “Friends who play chess?”

I glance out the window. The lawn games appear to be dying down, and I imagine everyone will be retiring to their rooms soon to rest before tonight’s activities. I doubt anyone will be looking for me in the next few hours, at least. I give my new friend a smile.

“Chess sounds delightful.”

9

ADELAIDE

"All right, everyone. Tonight's entertainment is about to commence." Aunt Charlotte waves a gloved hand in the air, the other wrapped around a pink and green striped hat box. Her eyes sparkle with mischief as she waits for us to gather round. Standing in the center of the parlor, she flashes a sly grin as she places the box on a nearby table. "And the game we shall be playing is… hide and seek!"

There's a burst of excited chatter, but she shushes us with another wave of her hand. "Here are the rules. Everyone will be paired off in teams of two. In this box is the name of every lady in attendance. Gentlemen will come up one at a time and draw the name of their partner. Once all the couples have been established, I'll choose which pair will be the seekers. Everyone else will have ten minutes to hide. Outdoors and personal chambers are strictly off limits. The last couple to be found will be proclaimed the winners and shall be given the honor of opening the ball evening after next. Any questions?"

I tune out the conversation that follows, my gaze wandering across the room. It passes over Julien, who looks less than thrilled with Aunt Charlotte's proposed activity. I suppose the idea of couples intentionally hiding themselves out of sight *is* rather scandalous. But what's the point of being at a party in the country if you don't bend the rules of society a bit?

My other brothers don't seem to share Julien's concerns, as I spy them jostling each other as they sport matching grins. No doubt they already have their eyes on a few hopeful partners. Marguerite sits on the edge of the

settee, sipping a glass of wine and looking bored as the older Lord Humphrey drones on about something or other beside her. Julien has never pressured her to take a suitor, but he has insisted she at least go through the motions. No doubt she's picturing the quaint little cottage she and Julia will retire to once her spinster status has been settled once and for all.

Aunt Charlotte calls the first gentleman forward, and there's a flurry of anticipation as everyone leans forward, waiting to see whose name he'll draw from the hat box. His round cheeks are ruddy with color as he unfolds the square of parchment and reads out, "Miss Annabel Downing." A young woman with dark brown hair and a white muslin dress steps forward, giving him a coy smile as they move to the side.

Aunt Charlotte lifts her glass in their direction before calling up the next gentleman. "Lord Miles Harrison."

He bounds to the center, his eager eyes meeting mine as he reaches inside the proffered box. He holds my gaze as he unfolds the paper, but his grin slips as he looks down at the name. There's a slight pause before he pastes a smile back on his face and says, "Miss Mary Dellum."

Is it terrible that I'm relieved?

Miss Dellum's face burns a bright red as she steps forward, glasses slipping down her nose as she stares at the floor, but it blossoms into a shy smile as she finally lifts her gaze long enough to accept the arm Miles is holding out. And if I'm not mistaken, Miles's own smile takes on a softer, more sincere edge as he leads her off to the side.

Seven more gentlemen are called to Aunt Charlotte's side and seven names that aren't mine are read out, leaving only one man left without a partner. His dark eyes bore into mine as he reaches into the box, both of us knowing there's only one name left.

"Miss Adelaide Brindamour."

Julien nudges his way through the others to stand beside Aunt Charlotte, his voice low but still audible as he mutters, "Are you sure this is entirely appropriate? Perhaps a game of charades would be better." He glares over her shoulder at Monsieur de Montragoux.

"Oh, don't be such a stick-in-the-mud." Aunt Charlotte waves him off as if he were nothing more than a pesky fly, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smirking. "Just for that, I'm making you and your partner 'it'. The rest of you"—she grins at the waiting couples—"have ten minutes to hide starting *now*."

There's a flurry of action and giggles as couples make a dash for the door. The borderline indecency of the game adds an undercurrent of excitement, and I spy Tristan sneaking a bottle of champagne from the sideboard as he follows Miss Talbot out of the room.

I can see why Julien might worry.

"After you, Miss Brindamour." Monsieur de Montragoux gestures for me to precede him into the hallway, and I attempt nonchalance as I lead us into the main foyer.

"Any ideas on a good hiding spot?"

He runs a hand over his beard. "None that come to mind. Perhaps we should simply pick a direction and explore?"

"Works for me." I glance around the large entrance hall. "Upstairs?"

"Upstairs it is."

We make our way up the main staircase and down a hallway until we stumble upon a servant's stair leading up to the third floor. It seems all of the lights have been snuffed out in preparation for the game, so it's with halting steps that we creep down the dark hallway. The first several doors lead to bedrooms, so we pass those by. Finally, one of the doors opens up into what appears to have been a schoolroom once upon a time. I wonder if there have been any children here since Jenny.

Monsieur de Montragoux leans against the teacher's desk. "This ought to do well enough."

I push back the heavy drapes covering the windows, allowing a shaft of moonlight to fill the room before taking a seat at the children's work table. "And now we wait."

He inclines his head, silence filling the space between us. It's punctured by the patter of feet and hushed giggles of another couple running past, but they don't stop to try our door. I trace the grain of the wooden table with my fingertip, searching for something to say.

He beats me to it. "Lord Harrison looked disappointed not to draw your name tonight."

"I'm sure he recovered quickly, and Miss Dellum appeared pleased with the outcome at least." It's unkind of me to say, I suppose, given the attention he's paid her, but I can't seem to help myself. The picture of them with their heads bent over that book bothers me more than I care to admit.

"He does give off a rather carefree attitude," Monsieur de Montragoux muses. "But that's to be expected in one so young."

Now *he's* being unkind. I should be affronted on Miles's behalf, but I'm not. A pleased warmth fills my chest at the casual slight. It's worrisome, given that I've always considered myself to be the compassionate type. But nothing about me feels normal when I'm near this man. This *stranger*, really.

I tilt my head, studying his features in the moonlight. The skin beneath his beard appears smooth, but his eyes are ones that have seen a good many things. "And how old are you to feel that a grown man of Lord Harrison's age is yet a child?"

His mouth creeps up at the corner. "I never said he was a child."

"Please," I scoff. "As if your tone didn't imply just that."

He chuckles. "Fine. The boy would be better suited for a summer outing with his school chums than a house party designed for arranging potential marital prospects."

"You don't think he's old enough to marry? Even though women at his age would be practically spinsters?"

"It's not his age, it's his mentality. He's as green as a ripe head of lettuce." He shakes his head. "I pity the woman who marries him. She won't just be a wife, she'll be a nursemaid."

"That's entirely too unkind." I give him an imperious look. "Miles can be serious when he puts his mind to it."

His brow quirks. "Miles, is it?"

I blush. "We're at a casual house party held by a family friend. It's perfectly acceptable to use given names."

"I couldn't agree more. Adelaide." He doesn't move, and yet it feels as if somehow he's gotten closer. Heat pools between my legs, and my blush deepens. What in blazes has come over me? Reacting like that to—what? My name? Gracious.

"It's a bit stuffy in here, don't you think?" I rise and move to the window, but when I try to open it, the frame remains firmly stuck. "Blast and damn."

"Allow me."

My breath catches at the sound of his voice above my ear. He reaches for the window, and the sleeve of his shirt brushes my arm. He's so close, if I were to shift back but an inch I'd be leaning against him. My toes curl as I fight the urge to do just that.

Voices outside the door startle us both; the seekers have arrived.

Before I can think what to do, Monsieur de Montragoux is pulling me against his chest, one arm wrapped around my waist as the other draws the curtain closed around us. I can't help it—I twist to face him, heart pounding as I hear the door click open.

Monsieur de Montragoux (no, not Monsieur—Bertrand. Didn't he imply as much when he called me Adelaide?) presses a finger against his lips, eyes locked on mine as we stand chest-to-chest behind the drapes. Footsteps echo through the room, and I picture my serious-minded brother drawing back the curtain and finding us. He'd be livid.

It's absolutely thrilling.

I lean into Bertrand's solid frame and bite my lip as his gaze drops to my breasts, the creamy swells rising above my décolletage. His grip on my waist tightens, and I swallow a gasp as his thigh presses between my legs. In a move far bolder than any I've made in my twenty-two years thus far, I tilt my hips so that my center rubs against him.

The heat from his eyes is blistering.

"See anyone?" Julien's voice is an ice bath, the closeness of it making his presence in the room all too real. I'd thought it exciting, but now my pulse races with more than lust. If he catches us like this, he won't just be livid. He'll be miserable, making the last two days here torture. He most certainly won't allow me anywhere near Bertrand.

Please don't find us.

"Not a soul," his partner replies, and I hold my breath as she glides past the window, her skirts brushing the thick, velvet drapes.

"This is ridiculous," Julien mutters. "Grown men and women skulking about the house in the dark like children. What was Aunt Charlotte thinking? If anyone in town hears about this, they'll be gossiping about it for weeks."

His partner laughs. "You worry too much."

Julien mutters something back that I can't quite catch, relief easing its way in as I realize their footsteps are moving toward the door. I wait for the reassuring click of it falling closed, and let out my breath as I lean into Bertrand's arms.

"That was close," I whisper.

"Too close," he agrees, his voice thick. He clears his throat as he steps back and draws the curtains aside. Crossing the room, he reclaims his spot on the desk without meeting my eyes. His foot bounces nervously, and he

pulls a silver flask from his inner breast pocket. A tremor runs over his frame as he drinks, and after a moment he relaxes. Tucking it away, he finally lifts his head, a smile on his face that says nothing of our shared moment behind the curtain. It's as distant as the space he's so purposefully placed between us.

I swallow the questions I truly wish to ask, and opt for another tactic as I return to my seat at the table. "Let me guess—whiskey?" I raise a brow, looking him over from head to toe. "You look like a whiskey man."

He touches his jacket where the flask is hidden away. "A tonic, actually." His voice is grave as he adds, "I wouldn't last a day without it."

"You're ill?" The annoyance and frustration I've been feeling melt away in an instant. He looks so healthy—is it possible he's actually dying? The thought twists my stomach into knots.

"There's a sickness inside me I wouldn't wish upon my greatest enemy." He runs a hand over his beard. "It's responsible for these blue streaks everyone is so fond of gawking at. Would that I could cut the monstrous thing off."

"Why don't you if you dislike it that much?"

"It's… complicated."

"Complicated," I repeat. Meaning he has a reason he doesn't wish to share. I can respect that. "But if you continue to take the tonic, you'll live?"

"That's right."

I suppress the urge to smother him in hugs, settling for a smile instead. "Well, then. I hope you have enough to last for years to come."

There's a hint of longing in his gaze as he looks at me. "If only the cost weren't so high, I'd wish the same."

If the rumors are to be believed, he has more money than he can spend. It must be an awfully rare tonic to warrant such worry. A bell rings from downstairs, calling us back to the parlor. The game is over, but I don't feel like a winner.

10

ADELAIDE

I barely sleep that night, haunted by visions of dying men with empty flasks slipping from their fingers. Whisper curls around my head as I toss and turn, attempting to soothe me. It's a touching gesture, but I'm up at dawn all the same, black smudges marking the undersides of my eyes. I feel unbearably restless, and when my gaze lands on the shimmering ripples of the lake, I know what I need to do.

A swim will set me to rights.

I wear my lightest dress, a simple white sheath with cap sleeves, and throw a blanket around my shoulders to warm myself with afterward. The house is quiet after the previous evening's revelries, several of the guests not returning to their rooms until well after midnight. They'll likely sleep until lunch, which suits me fine. I'm in no mood for company.

What could he have that requires a steady consumption of tonic? It doesn't seem to be anything contagious. If it were, he surely wouldn't be attending house parties… would he?

What I know about rare diseases wouldn't fill a paragraph, much less answer the questions that keep popping into my mind. Tristan claims an interest in medicine, although he's slacked so much in his studies I'm beginning to doubt he's serious about becoming a doctor. It's more likely he's using it as an excuse to avoid working with Julien full-time. Still, perhaps I can find a way to casually work it into conversation later, see if he's heard of anything.

The water feels wonderful as I step into the shallows, having discarded my stockings and shoes in the grass. It's been a hot, humid summer, and now the lake is as close to bath water as it'll ever get. I wade out farther, letting it soak the hem of my dress all the way up to my waist before diving the rest of the way in.

I adore the feeling of being submersed, that momentary escape from the world above. When I was younger, I dreamed of sprouting gills and spending the rest of my days exploring the muted depths of the sea. Even now, the idea brings a smile to my lips.

I'd make a perfectly lovely mermaid.

I swim to the center and roll onto my back, floating atop the surface. Time slows as I idly drift, and I close my eyes as the morning sun warms my cheeks. Something cool brushes the tips of my fingers, and I peek one eye open as I turn my head.

It would seem I'm not as alone as I thought.

A little boy with black hair stares back at me. He's immersed in the water from the nose down, his wide eyes only an inch above the surface, but I can hear his voice as clearly as if he were whispering directly into my ear. "Are you hiding from the bad man, too?"

I maneuver myself into an upright position, unease seeping through my bones. "Just out for a morning swim."

He considers this for a moment, watching me tread water. "You're a good swimmer." I can see the hint of a frown beneath the surface. "Unlike me."

I'm itching to swim ashore, wanting nothing more than to grab my things and flee from this apparition. All my life they've haunted me, and I'm tired. Tired of asking why, tired of caring. Tired of having nothing more to offer than kind words and a listening ear.

And yet, I stay.

"Is that how you died?" I ask gently. "Did you drown?"

His head bobs. "I was looking for Mama."

The water cools, sending shivers through my body. "You were looking for her in the lake?"

Another bob. "She came here to hide from the bad man," he whispers, casting a glance toward the house. "But I'm afraid the stones in her pockets were too heavy. She hasn't come out. I… I have to find her."

My heart breaks at the quiver that trembles through his voice. I wonder how long his ghost has lingered, searching for a mother who sought freedom in the rushes. “Your mother is at peace now.” I brush back his hair. “Don’t you think it’s time you found some too?”

His expression remains somber. “Mama is here, though.”

My teeth chatter as the water grows colder still. “She’s still hiding in the lake?”

“No. Not hiding,” he whispers, and I scream as a hand grasps my ankle, pulling me below the surface. Long, black hair swirls around a frighteningly beautiful face as the woman holds me under. I kick at it, struggling to free myself from her vice-like grip, but she only proceeds to claw her way up my body until we’re face-to-face. Clamping a hand over my mouth, she whispers, “Shush now. He’ll hear you.”

I dig my fingers into her icy flesh, fighting for all I’m worth. She may be able to touch me, but contact goes both ways. I wedge my foot against her stomach and push off, gasping for air as I come up. The relief is fleeting, however; the woman’s arms wrapping around me from behind as she pulls me back down, down, down, all the way to the bottom of the lake. Mud stirs beneath my feet, making murky whirlpools that obscure my vision. My lungs burn with the need to breathe.

A splash cuts through the muffled sounds of my struggle, and as the world begins to fade to black, a flash of blue comes streaking toward me. In my foggy state, it looks like a shark. *That’s silly. Sharks don’t live in lakes.*

My eyelids are heavy, too heavy to stay open.

But they do… have similar…teeth…

Air fills my lungs with a startling rush, and my eyes fly open on a gasp. A dripping Bertrand hovers over me, his gaze brimming with worry. When our eyes meet, he drops his head with a relieved, “Thank god.”

“You.” I touch his cheek, tentatively brushing the soft hair of his beard. I’m shaking all over, but the moment his hand covers mine, holding it in place, I still. *This is what it’s like to feel truly safe.* I marvel at the thought. “You saved me.”

“And you scared the bloody shit out of me,” he replies, his voice rough. “What were you doing, swimming in this lake?”

“I couldn’t sleep. And I… I was restless.”

“So go for a ride,” he snaps. “Anything would be better than diving into the arms of a vengeful spirit.”

I push myself up, hackles rising. “I didn’t know she was there.”

“How could you miss something like that?” He tunnels his hand through his hair, pulling at the ends. “Anyone born with your ability should have seen that lake was haunted from a mile away.”

“Well, excuse me for being oblivious,” I retort, now fully annoyed. I stagger to my feet, the recent underwater struggle making me wobble. Bertrand catches me under my elbow, steadying me, but I wrench my arm away with a huff. “Thank you for your assistance back there, but I’m fine.” I snatch up my shoes and stockings, not bothering to put them on. Throwing the blanket around my shoulders with a flourish worthy of the stage, I stomp across the grass toward the house without another word.

I feel his gaze on my back the entire way.

11

ADELAIDE

I find Julien waiting in my room because of course he'd be there at the precise moment I wish to see him the least. Dripping wet in a dress that's become more than a little transparent, I secure the blanket around me as I skirt past where he sits at the desk and head to the wardrobe. He waits in pensive silence as I swap out the blanket for my dressing gown, the vein in his forehead bulging as he watches me fuss with the ties. When at last I have no other way to stall, I sit on the edge of the bed and brace myself for what's to come.

"You…" His voice drips with frustration, and he rubs a hand over his face before continuing. He waves at me, seemingly at a loss for words. "Why?"

"It was hot." I give him an imperious look. "I went for a swim."

"You went for a swim," he repeats, eyes wide with disbelief. "By yourself."

"It was early. I didn't wish to disturb anyone."

"It's improper," he seethes. "An unmarried woman running around looking like… like some kind of wild hoyden."

"I didn't do anything wrong." I lift my chin. I will not be lectured to as if I were a child.

"What if someone had seen you?" Julien protests. I opt not to mention someone did. "Your prospects would have been ruined."

"My prospects," I scoff. "I swear, that's all you ever talk about anymore. God, Julien, what happened to the brother who used to see me as

a person and not just a business transaction? I'd like that one back, if you please."

"That's not fair, Addie." Julien stands, hands clasped behind his back as he turns to face the window. "You know I wouldn't push you if it wasn't absolutely necessary. Just look at Marguerite. Haven't I done everything I can to support her and Julia?"

"You've done well by them," I admit. "I just wish you'd extend the same understanding to me."

He turns, giving me a suspicious look. "Are you implying you're attracted to women as well?"

"No. I'm simply saying I deserve to have a say in who I will or will not marry. I don't appreciate being manipulated into something that will dictate the rest of my life."

"I'd hardly call presenting a handsome young option for your consideration manipulating," Julien protests. "Lord Harrison has shown himself to be kind, considerate, and responsible, and if I'm not mistaken, had you laughing quite a bit during yesterday's lawn bowls. Yes, he'd add an enormous amount of credibility to the business, but I also believe he'd make you happy." He takes a deep breath. "I need this, Addie. Father's scandal—"

"Was his own damn fault," I interject. "I won't sacrifice my life for his poor choices. Call me selfish or pigheaded, I don't care. But I refuse to back down on this. Who I marry will be *my* choice and no one else's."

Julien places his hands on my shoulders, his gaze searching my face. "But you *will* marry?"

He looks older than he is, the lines between his brows deepened from constant frowning. This past year has been hard on all of us, but most of all on him. He's kept us afloat through scandal, cut anyone who dared mutter a word against either me or my siblings. He's tried to be a good brother, even if I don't always love his methods.

I sigh. "Yes."

His expression softens. "And you will consider Lord Harrison's proposal?"

"He hasn't made one."

"But if he does," Julien presses, and I narrow my eyes. He knows something.

“Then I’ll consider it,” I say slowly. “Along with any other proposals that come my way.”

Julien’s face tightens. “Do you have a reason to suspect there will be more?” His eye twitches, and I can practically hear the gears turning in his head as he sorts through the possibilities.

I think of a certain blue-bearded gentleman with an annoying ability to make my heart flutter. I doubt he’d have come to this party if he wasn’t looking for a wife, but he’s doted far more time and attention on Miss Dellum than on me. And yet…

I shrug.

Julien’s jaw clenches. “Other prospects are fine, of course, with one exception. I will not, under any circumstances, accept Monsieur de Montragoux. He is scandal incarnate. That beard—”

“Is a side effect of a tonic he takes to stay alive,” I interrupt. “You can hardly fault him for wanting to live.”

“Bullshit. What kind of tonic would cause a man’s beard to change color?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t think that’s any of our business. I only brought it up since you felt the need to use his appearance as a slight against him.”

“So you *are* considering that man?” Julien growls.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You’re defending him.”

“As I would anyone in his situation.” I shoot to my feet and march to the door. “I will listen to Lord Harrison’s proposal should he make one, but that is the only promise you’ll have. Now, if you’re quite done lecturing me, I’d rather not catch cold and miss the rest of the party by remaining in these wet clothes.” I swing the door open, turning my nose up as Julien skulks past.

I’ve never been as irritated with my brother as I am now, and in all honesty, he doesn’t completely deserve the icy dismissal. But I can’t help it. The moment he said Bertrand was off-limits, something inside me roared in denial. Emotions I’ve never felt before are welling up inside me, stirring my thoughts into a jumbled mess. And while I don’t entirely understand why, I know with a sudden certainty—

I won’t be satisfied with anyone else.

12

ADELAIDE

I can't stop looking at him. When I swipe my brush over the canvas set up in front of me, it's blue that stains the surface. Never mind that I'm painting red roses.

Marguerite arches a brow as she studies my work. "Interesting color choice."

"It's a metaphor," I lie. "Roses are the flowers most often tossed upon a coffin. They're sad, mournful blooms at heart. The blue reflects that."

Marguerite smirks. "And what do your continued glances toward a certain gentleman reflect, I wonder?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean."

Marguerite hums as she swirls her brush through pink paint. "Liar. You've been watching him all afternoon. And what's more, he's been watching you. Something happened, didn't it? Was it during hide-and-seek?" She leans closer, covering her mouth with her hand. "Did he kiss you?"

My cheeks heat as I recall the way I rubbed myself against his leg, the insistent ache that had throbbed between my thighs. "Of course not."

Marguerite looks unconvinced. "Well, whatever you're doing or not doing with the gentleman, just make sure you aren't caught. Julien would have a fit."

I peek over the top of my canvas to where our eldest brother is currently sharing a drink with Lord Hefner in the gazebo. They've been there ever since Aunt Charlotte announced we'd be painting in the garden this

afternoon. While everyone else is exploring their artistic sides, Julien is exploring Lord Hefner's knowledge of current events and the effect they might have on his bank account. "Our dear brother," I purr in a saccharine voice, "can kiss my lily white ass."

Marguerite lets out a rather unladylike snort, which sends me into my own fit of giggles.

"You two seem to be having fun." Miles grins crookedly from the other side of our canvases, and I swallow the rest of my laughter as I compose myself. "Do I dare ask what you're talking about?"

"Oh, you know." Marguerite waves her hand. "Just admiring the flowers."

"It *is* a magnificent garden," Miles agrees.

"I especially like the lilies," I manage to squeak out.

Another snort from Marguerite, who slaps a hand over her mouth.

Miles playfully narrows his eyes. "You two are up to something, but being the gentleman I am, I won't pry."

"A true gallant," I tease.

He throws his shoulders back, puffing up his chest. "I am rather chivalrous, aren't I?"

"And not at all vain."

"Not at all," he laughs. "I'm as humble as they come. Which is why I'm humbly requesting the honor of your first two dances at tomorrow night's ball." He sobers. "It'll be our last evening here, and I have something important I'd like to discuss with you."

There's a suggestive gleam in his eyes that leeches the laughter from my belly. When I glance at the gazebo, I find Julien watching us, and I have a terrible suspicion he knows exactly what Miles wishes to discuss. Or rather, propose. "It's I who should be honored," I hedge, licking my lips. My mouth feels as if it's been stuffed with sawdust. "But if you recall, Monsieur de Montragoux and I were the winners for hide-and-seek. We're expected to open the ball together."

Miles's face falls, but he quickly recovers. "The waltz, then." He grins. "It'll be easier to talk during that anyway."

I bite my lip. Just hearing the word waltz makes me wonder what it would feel like to be twirled around the ballroom in Bertrand's arms. The warmth the thought brings is immediately doused as I picture him waltzing with Miss Dellum.

He wouldn't.

And yet, he did take the easel next to hers. I look over to where they're working, and inwardly preen when I find him watching me. She might be the one beside him, but I'm the one who's claimed his attention.

"Adelaide? The, um, the waltz?" Miles's uncertain voice draws me back, and I realize I've yet to answer his question. Bertrand's lips twitch as he stares back at me from the other side of the garden, and it takes every ounce of my resolve to tear my gaze away and focus on Miles.

"Sorry, dizzy spell." I fan my cheeks. "Too much sun I'm afraid."

The suspicious look on Miles's face washes away. "Let's get you inside at once." He gently takes my elbow as he leads me toward the house. "Marguerite, could you fetch your sister a glass of that lemonade over there?"

"Of course," Marguerite replies, although the look she shoots me says she's on to my ruse.

"Lemonade would be lovely," I say faintly, allowing Miles to lead me inside. He makes no more mention of dancing, for which I'm grateful. While I know the discussion is inevitable, I'm not ready to have it yet. My mind is far too muddled with thoughts of Bertrand.

As I sip my lemonade, I stage a spill, splashing droplets of tart beverage across my skirt. "Oh, how clumsy of me." I feign a look of embarrassment. "I'd best go up and change before anyone else sees what a klutz I am."

"I couldn't agree more." Miles takes my glass with a wink. "If any of the other gentlemen spy those rosy cheeks of yours, I fear I'll have more competition than I can handle. They're much too fetching."

"And you're far too kind." I give him a wry smile. "If you'll excuse me." I dip a shallow curtsy before whisking away. The scant bit of lemonade on my dress is already drying, but I make my way up to my room to change regardless. I take my time, unbuttoning my dress and letting it slip off as I sit back on the bed with a relieved sigh.

It's much too hot for long dresses and heavy thoughts.

A meow from the floor by my feet agrees with me, and I smile as a bundle of ghostly fur leaps onto my lap. I scoop Whisper into my arms and bury my face in her cool fur, breathing her in. She smells of night air and fallen leaves, and I close my eyes as I let the comforting scent wash over me.

"What am I going to do, Whisper? I'm all kinds of mixed up inside."

She rubs her head against my cheek, purring softly. While the action doesn't provide an answer to my dilemma, it calms me in a way simple words cannot. I press a kiss against her fur and set her lovingly on the bed before standing up with renewed determination.

"What I need to do is clear my mind." I grab a clean dress from the wardrobe and quickly step into it. "And I know just the way to do it—chess." I glance down at Whisper, who's curled up in the center of my pillow. "Coming with?"

The feline blinks baleful eyes.

"I'll take that as a no." I twist to fasten the last few buttons of my pale blue dress. A white sash accentuates my waist, and I tie it into a bow in the back before performing a hasty assessment in the mirror. "A bit too casual for dinner, but I can always change." Right now I need the comfort of simplicity.

Blowing a kiss in Whisper's direction, I slip out the door and make my way down to the orangery. I pause before each corner, listening for the sound of voices, but it seems everyone is either still in the garden or otherwise occupied. Aside from a few passing servants, the house is relatively silent. That is, until I reach the orangery doors. Childish giggles drift through the solid wood, accompanied by the deep rumble of male laughter. My heart trips into double time.

He's here.

I press my fingers against the door, not quite pushing them open as I linger, listening to Bertrand's voice blend with Jenny's in the most beautiful way. Until now, he's been dark and mysterious with a tragic edge that makes me want to draw him in and tease that elusive glimmer of light into his eyes. To rain kisses down his neck and chest until the only word on his lips is my name. No thought to the future, just pure, unadulterated passion.

This feels different.

It feels *real*.

I crack the doors open and peek inside, a smile tugging at my lips as I spy the pair of them. Bertrand is turning a long rope, the other end of which has been secured to the back of a chair, and Jenny is jumping in the middle. I cover my mouth to keep a laugh from slipping free as her pale feet pass straight through the rope's length.

"That's cheating," Bertrand laughs.

Jenny pokes out her tongue. “You’re just mad because I’ve beaten your count.”

“Only because you’re cheating.”

“It’s your word against mine, and I—Adelaide!” Jenny’s face breaks into a grin as she catches me watching them. She floats across the room and throws her arms around me. I can only just feel them, like the brush of silk against bare skin, but I do my best to return the embrace with equal enthusiasm.

“You two look to be having fun.” I glance over Jenny’s shoulder to where Bertrand is standing, the skipping rope dangling from his fingers. His necktie has been loosened significantly, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to the elbows. A smile plays across his lips as our eyes meet.

“If by fun, you mean getting trounced by this little cheater here, then yes. We’re having heaps of fun.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Jenny says, relinquishing her hold on me as she floats back toward Bertrand. “He’s just upset because I’m so light on my feet.”

I glance down to where she hovers a good three inches off the floor. “I can see that.”

Jenny wiggles her feet with a cheeky grin, and cranes her neck to peer behind me. “Did you bring Whisper with you today?”

“Sorry, but when I left she looked to be settling in for a long nap. I can try calling her, but I doubt she’ll come.”

Jenny’s mouth puckers into a moue of disappointment. “Oh.”

“You could go to my room and curl up with her, if you like,” I offer.

She’s instantly brighter. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

“Thank you!” She disappears with a squeal of excitement, and I turn to Bertrand with a wry grin.

“It would seem my cat has outranked me.”

“If it’s any consolation, *I* find your company far preferable to that of your feline companion.”

“I’d be flattered if you hadn’t already disclosed your dislike for the animals the last time we were in this room.”

“I don’t believe I said anything of the sort. *They’re* the ones who are wary of me, not the other way around.” His voice drops low enough to send delicious tingles down my spine. “Clever beasts.”

There's a hint of warning in his gaze that makes me hesitate, glancing back at the open doors. Propriety would demand I make my excuses and leave before anyone catches us here unchaperoned but chatting in a brightly lit orangery feels tame compared to Aunt Charlotte's game of hide-and-seek. And goodness knows I've given enough of myself over to the expectations of others. Surely, I've earned a few moments of intrigue.

I tilt my head, lips curving into a teasing smirk. "Are all the gentlemen in France skipping rope these days?"

"Oh yes," Bertrand replies, playing along with an amused sparkle in his eyes. "All of the most fashionable gentlemen's clubs are doing it. Marbles too. Very popular among the upper crust."

"And here I thought those places were full of stuffed shirts and arrogant bores. I appreciate the insight."

He drapes his end of the rope over the chair, chuckling softly. "Happy to oblige."

I take a tentative step closer. "Speaking of appreciation, I don't think I properly thanked you for your assistance this morning. You saved my life, and I all but bit your head off."

He picks his top hat off the table and fiddles with the brim. "You had every right after the way I snapped at you. The last thing anyone needs after a brush with death is a lecture." His eyes darken briefly, and he looks away. "I should go. It wouldn't be good for you to be found here with me. Think of what your brother would say."

I inch forward. "Tristan would laugh and say 'good on you'."

A smile pulls at the corner of his mouth, but still he refuses to look at me. "That's not the brother I was referring to and you know it."

Another step, and I trace the faint scent of his cologne. It beckons me closer still, until I'm only an arm's length away from his side. He remains motionless, fingers frozen in place as he grips his top hat with whitened knuckles.

"Bertrand." I breathe his name like a prayer, a silent plea for him to turn his head and *look at me* echoing through the relentless thrum of my heart.

He does, and I'm struck by the cacophony of emotions warring in those obsidian eyes: fear, sorrow, regret…*longing*. Desperate, heart-wrenching longing. "Adelaide—"

Heavy footsteps at the door cut off the rest of his words, and I can't help but glare at the man standing inside the doorway as I turn. He ignores me

completely, a black bowler casting his round face in shadow as he addresses Bertrand.

"Miss Dellum has finished freshening up and awaits your presence in the parlor, Monsieur."

Bertrand closes his eyes, his posture relaxing as if by sheer will. When he opens them, the emotion I saw before is gone, and he gives me a detached smile as he slaps his top hat back onto his head. "If you'll excuse me, Miss Brindamour, I'm afraid I have another engagement to attend to."

He starts to leave, but I reach out and catch his hand. His eyes widen as he looks down, and I can feel my cheeks heating at the utter brazenness of my actions. But I have to know. "You and Miss Dellum… you're not *actually* engaged… are you?"

His lips part, his gaze still transfixed on our joined hands. "I…" His grip tightens, and for one, brief moment I think he's going to pull me closer. But then he jerks away, turning his back to me with a gruff, "I have to go."

I lift my hand to my lips as he leaves, skin tingling where his briefly lingered. "That's not a yes, Monsieur." And I don't plan on sitting around and waiting for it to become one, either.

13

ADELAIDE

I wake before dawn the following morning and dress in my riding habit. My window provides an excellent view of the stables, and from what I was able to glean from the maid who brought my tea up last night, the mysterious Monsieur de Montragoux has gone riding every morning since his arrival. So I wait, and I watch.

Hours later, it pays off.

I leap to my feet as I spy Bertrand entering the stables by himself. I've already located the nearest servant's staircase, and I slip down it as I sneak out of the house and sprint to the stables, praying no one sees me. I duck inside and take a moment to catch my breath as I watch him chat with a young groom.

His deep voice carries down the stable hall. "And a mount for Miss Brindamour." He turns, pinning me to the door with his gaze. "It seems she'll be joining me."

"Of course, sir," the groom mumbles, hurrying to fetch another horse.

I swallow, not at all sure this was such a good idea. The severity in his expression is making my legs wobble, and a tiny voice in the back of my head is whispering for me to run. *No. I have to do this. I have to know.* I adopt an air of confidence as I walk over, but there's a tremble in my voice as I greet him. "It's a lovely day for a ride."

His eyes soften. "That it is."

I bite my lip, nerves skittering beneath my boldness. "You're sure you don't mind my joining you?"

His gaze drops to my mouth. “On the contrary. I’m afraid I’m far too happy for my own good.”

I inch closer. “What’s wrong with being happy? I’d think that a good thing.”

“You’d think,” he whispers, voice husky. “But I’m afraid happiness is an addiction I can’t afford.”

“It’s just one ride.” I take a step back as the groom leads a beautiful brown mare down the hall. Taking the reins, I throw Bertrand a challenging look. “I’m sure you can handle that much.”

“I used to be sure of a lot of things.” He waves the groom away before offering his interlaced fingers for me to step into. “But now…” His breath hitches as I place my hand on his shoulder, and his fingers linger on my ankle a beat longer than necessary as I settle into the saddle. Snatching his hand back, he mounts his own horse and leads us out.

Neither of us utters a word as the countryside flies by.

His white, linen shirt is rolled up to the elbows, and I find myself fixating on the muscles that cord his forearms as he grips the reins, recalling the strength of his hands as they wrapped around my waist that night behind the curtain. Squeezing my thighs, I urge my horse past him. Hooves thunder in rhythm with my heart as he catches up, a wicked grin slashed across his face as he meets my gaze.

I veer left, down the hill toward the stream. The world turns in slow motion as I rein my horse in, allowing her to cool down before dismounting. Bertrand watches me from atop his mount as I tether her to the willow that sways beside the clear, cool water. I lower myself onto the soft moss and tilt my head up. “Sit with me?”

He hesitates, his expression shuttered. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I think it’s an excellent idea.”

His knuckles whiten. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I’m a grown woman, Bertrand.” I lean back on my hands, arching my back. “I know exactly what I’m saying.”

His voice is plaintive as he whispers, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I trail my fingertips along the edge of my décolletage. “Maybe I like a little pain.”

He sucks in a breath, his heated gaze following the flow of my hand as it pushes aside a delicate white sleeve, baring my shoulder. It lingers there,

searing my flesh with its intensity, but then he turns, looking determinedly in the other direction. “I’m going to propose to Miss Dellum tomorrow.”

The world tilts, slamming me back into reality.

I’m a bloody fool.

My cheeks burn as I right myself, tugging frantically at my sleeve. *What was I thinking, trying to seduce him like that? I knew he’d been spending all his time with her. I knew it…*

And yet, I never once saw him look at her the way he’s looked at me.

“I didn’t realize you felt that way about her,” I murmur. “My apologies.”

“Don’t.” His voice cracks. “Please, don’t apologize. You weren’t… you weren’t wrong. She’s a nice girl, but she’s not”—he takes a steadying breath —“she’s not you.”

I can’t look at him. I’m on the brink of tears, and I can’t bear for him to see me cry. What little pride I have left won’t allow it. Still, I have to know. “If that’s true then… why would you want to marry her?”

“Because she’s a smart choice,” he whispers. “An easy choice.”

“And I’m what?” I let the building anger dry my tears. “A poor choice? Too wild, too wanton?” I square my shoulders as I stand, looking him in the eye. “Too wicked?”

His gaze never wavers. “No, Adelaide. You’re too perfect. And that is why it can never be you.” With that, he turns his horse around. “I trust you can find your way back without me?”

I manage a nod, which is ridiculous, since he’s facing the other direction. “I’ll be fine,” I lie, willing myself to sound unaffected and failing miserably.

His back is rigid as he remains in place. A muscle ticks in his jaw, and he gives a jerky nod. “You will be,” he whispers, the words barely audible.

And then he’s gone, and I allow the tears to break free.

14

ADELAIDE

"Margie." I fiddle with the ties of my nightgown, not daring to look at my sister's reflection in the mirror as she brushes my hair. "If Julia didn't want to be with you, would you marry someone you didn't love if it meant helping the family?"

Marguerite's hands still. "Why? Did she say something to you?"

"No, of course not," I assure her, hearing the note of panic lurking beneath the calm. "It was just a hypothetical."

"I see." She resumes brushing, but her eyes are shrewd when I finally dare to meet them. "Hypothetically, is the person who doesn't want to be with someone a mysterious gentleman with a blue beard?"

I pick at a spot of lint. "Perhaps."

"Addie." She says my name softly as she moves to sit beside me on the cushioned bench, the brush tucked away in her lap. "If Monsieur de Montragoux doesn't see what an absolute jewel you are, then I'm glad the two of you can't be together. You deserve someone who will cherish you as much as Julia cherishes me. And as for marrying to benefit the family, I say to hell with that."

"Marguerite!" I let out a startled laugh. "You never swear."

"I'm a lady of many layers." She leans into my side, smiling at our reflections. "And despite what society thinks, I don't need you or any of our brothers to take care of me. I already have a cottage in the country, and I'm not so high in the instep that I can't labor for a living. If the business fails, Julia and I can sew, garden, wash clothes, clean houses, or whatever else we

need to do to stay afloat. I'd rather spend my days working hard, than tie my nights to someone I didn't love. So don't let Julien pressure you into something you don't want for my sake. I only pushed you toward Lord Harrison because I thought he might make you happy. It wasn't to please myself or anyone else in the family."

I take her hand in mine, resting them both on my lap. "I'm eternally grateful I was blessed with you as my sister, Margie. I don't know how you've put up with me all these years."

"Patience." A mischievous twinkle lights her eyes. "Lots *and lots* of patience."

"Very funny. And here I thought we were having a special, sisterly moment." I fake a pout as I turn on the bench, lifting my nose in the air. All while eyeing the closest pillow.

"Aw, I was just teasing." Marguerite twists around just as I leap up and snatch the pillow off the bed. I land a solid hit to the chest before she has time to react.

"How's that patience now?" I crow.

"Why you—" She's up and grabbing her own pillow within seconds. The war wages through a battlefield of feathers and doesn't cease until we're both lying breathless on the bed, matching grins on our faces. Marguerite rolls her head to the side with an expectant look. "Well? Are you going to do as Julien wishes and accept Lord Harrison's proposal tomorrow night? Or are you going to stand your ground and hold out for a man of your choosing?"

But what if the man of my choosing doesn't choose me?

"I don't know." I sigh. "Miles seems kind, and he makes me laugh. He wouldn't be the worst choice in the world."

"Do you think he'd understand your… special abilities?"

"The ones you think I'm faking?"

She frowns. "I'm willing to consent that *you* believe they're real."

"How generous."

Marguerite purses her lips. "Do you think you could love him?"

I roll over, giving her my back. Whisper appears, and butts her head against mine before curling into my side. "Perhaps," I murmur, and it's not entirely untrue. What do I really know of love anyway? What I feel for Bertrand is violent and impulsive, not soft and sweet like the looks I see Marguerite give Julia when she's not looking. The hollow feeling in my gut,

the ache in my chest when I think of him marrying Miss Dellum aren't symptoms of love. I simply want what I can't have. It's a foolish, childish feeling, and I'll have none of it.

I am not in love with Bertrand de Montragoux.

No matter how much my heart tries to tell me otherwise.

THE FOLLOWING day passes in a blur, with everyone retiring early to rest before the closing ball that evening. Aunt Charlotte invited the locals to join us, so there's already a buzz of mingling voices as Julien leads me to the ballroom. I press my hands against the cinched bodice of my silk dress, willing the nerves away. *It's just a dance.* A dance that could determine the direction of my future. I blanch, glancing about for a nearby vase should I need to cast up my accounts.

Julien draws my hand into the crook of his arm and layers his atop it. "Lord Harrison is a good man. He'll make you happy, I promise."

I think I hate my brother just a little.

A footman opens the door, and Julien ushers us into the room. A string quartet plays softly as people of varying ranks sip champagne and make idle conversation. The dancing won't begin until everyone has arrived. *And Bertrand and I will open.* I can't decide if the thought excites or terrifies me more. My gaze automatically seeks him out. I expect to find him beside Miss Dellum, but to my surprise, I see her speaking with Miles. It takes a moment, but I finally spy Bertrand half-hidden behind a column—watching me.

My stays suddenly feel much too tight.

"Adelaide, darling, you look absolutely stunning this evening." Aunt Charlotte sweeps over, blocking my view, and I reluctantly give her my attention. She winks at Julien. "You don't mind if I steal her away, do you?"

"Not at all." He gives her a short bow, and before I know it, I'm being ushered to the other side of the room. At some point a flute of champagne appears in my hand, but I don't attempt to sip it until Aunt Charlotte stops moving.

"This ought to do." She looks around the secluded corner she's whisked us into before giving me a bright smile. "I feel as if I've hardly had time to

say two words to you this entire visit. Not that I blame you for keeping busy—I did handpick the guest list after all."

"I've had a lovely time, and everyone has been quite amiable." I hesitate. "You know them all well, then?"

Her lips curve into a knowing smile. "Well enough to invite them into my home. Why? Was there anyone in particular you wished to know about?"

I blush. "Oh, no, not… not particularly."

"Hmm." She glances out over the ballroom. "There is one gentleman I invited with you in mind, actually. Although your brother seems to favor the young Lord Harrison." She gives me a shrewd look. "I wonder which *you* prefer?"

I fumble for my fan, shielding my face under the pretense of cooling it. "Whoever do you mean?"

"Why, Monsieur de Montragoux, of course. You're the reason I invited him."

The fan slips from my fingers, and champagne sloshes over the rim of my glass as I hurry to retrieve it. "Wh-why would you do that?"

"Because." She waits until I've righted myself before whispering, "He's like you."

"Like me?"

She widens her eyes. "He can see them," she whispers. "Ghosts."

I grip the fan as I gape at her. "You know about that?"

She nods. "As I said upon your arrival, you're just like your mother."

"My mother saw ghosts?"

"She more than saw them," Aunt Charlotte says. "She befriended them. In fact, her best friend as a child was a ghost named Lili, if I recall correctly. She tried introducing us, but I'm afraid I don't have the sight. I cautioned her, however, against speaking so freely of her gift. Not everyone looks kindly on people who see things they cannot. Which is why I hoped you and Monsieur de Montragoux would hit it off this week. Having a partner who understands you is imperative to a felicitous marriage."

My head spins from the revelation that my gift is inherited. That Mother was so much like me. *She had a best friend who was a ghost; I have a ghost cat.* I bite my lip as I consider the rest of Aunt Charlotte's words. "How did you know about Monsieur de Montragoux? Surely he didn't tell you."

A smug smile plays across her lips. “I can tell when someone is talking to themselves or talking to something invisible. He’s careful, but not careful enough for these sharp eyes.” She taps the side of her head. “I caught him doing it at an event last month, and when I inquired around I discovered he not only had a fortune but was in the market for a wife.” She shrugs. “I wasn’t sure if the two of you would suit, but I thought it was at least worth an introduction.” She raises a brow. “So? What *do* you think of our blue-bearded guest?”

“He’s…” *Intoxicating. Excruciatingly handsome. Painfully mysterious.* “Nice.”

Aunt Charlotte purses her lips. “Nice, is it?”

I nod.

She harrumphs. “Youth is wasted on the young. Come on, then. I do believe it’s time for your dance with the *nice man*.”

I feel as though I’ve swallowed a beehive. I may have convinced Aunt Charlotte that my feelings are tepid at best, but there’s no way I’ll be able to hide the brewing maelstrom of emotions from Bertrand when we’re mere inches away. I don’t have long to worry, however, as Aunt Charlotte is already signaling the musicians.

The crowd parts, clearing a circle in the middle of the dance floor. For a moment I stand alone, heart pounding louder with each breath, but then he’s there, bowing over my hand. I trace the subtle scent of his cologne as he lifts his head. His dark eyes lock on mine, and the room melts away. There is only this moment. Only us.

The music swells, and we dance.

15

ADELAIDE

"You look lovely tonight, Miss Brindamour." Bertrand's deep voice caresses my neck as he turns us first left, then right—arms outstretched, gloved fingertips pressing gently as we turn about the room. Other couples join in, following our lead, but his voice is the only one I hear.

"You're looking well yourself, Monsieur." I tilt my head, casting him an appraising glance from beneath my lashes. His beard is neatly trimmed, and the silvery, midnight blue vest he wears beneath his dress coat brings out the cobalt streaks. His neck is free of the stuffy cravats worn by most of the other gentlemen (my brothers included), and I find myself transfixed by the column of bare skin above his simple necktie. I bite my lip as I imagine myself leaning in and running my tongue over the smooth flesh.

His grip tightens.

My feet trip.

He catches me, guiding me through the steps as the room whirls around in a blur. I've only had a few sips of champagne, and yet I feel as giddy as if I've drank an entire bottle. My throat tightens as the last few notes fade away. This is it. Our last dance. Our last evening together. Tomorrow, we depart, engaged perhaps, but not to each other.

How is that even possible?

Does he not feel the same pull, the same unrelenting need to be closer?

"Excuse me," I whisper, drawing away and ducking my head as I make my escape.

I cannot stay here, can no longer pretend in the face of all these strangers. I catch Marguerite's eye across the room, sending her a silent plea for assistance. Ever the astute sister, she immediately draws Julien's attention, allowing me to slip away without his notice.

I pass a few servants who throw me questioning glances, and mumble something about needing air. When I get to the garden, I'm relieved to find it empty aside from a silvery pool of moonlight that guides me down the path to the gazebo.

"Adelaide."

His voice is like a snake in the dark, striking me between my shoulder blades and freezing me in place. I squeeze my eyes closed as I hear his soft footfalls approach. I can't do this, can't look him in the face knowing he'll never be mine.

His fingers wrap around my wrist, gently pulling me around. Still, I refuse to look at him, focusing instead on the top button of his vest. "I wish to be alone," I murmur.

"And I wish I could leave you alone." The husky edge of his voice sets a spree of fireworks off in my belly. "But it would seem I'm more selfish than I thought." His fingers brush my chin, gently tilting my face up until I'm forced to meet his eyes.

The desire I see reflected there incinerates my thoughts, and I can barely recall what he said, much less understand what he means by it. "You…" I lick my lips, and he moves closer. His hand drifts upward, cupping my cheek.

"Run away with me, Adelaide," he whispers. "Run away and marry *me*."

My heart thunders in my chest, that same giddy feeling from before muddying my senses. It's crazy what he's proposing, scandalous, and yet I can think of nothing I'd rather do. Still, "What about Miss Dellum?"

"It would seem this is her lucky day," he murmurs, hand sliding to the back of my neck, the other finding its way to my waist. His gaze is deadly serious. "I'm not a good man, Adelaide. The things I've done…" He shakes his head. "If I were stronger, I'd leave and let you marry Lord Harrison in peace."

He means it, and I know I should listen. That I should return to the ballroom and the safety of my family. But a part of me thrills at his words, dark and foreboding. They awaken the desires I only dare to acknowledge

when all others are long asleep and my fingers are free to explore. “I don’t want to marry him.” My hands press against his chest, and I slide them upward, over his shoulders and around his neck. “I want you.”

“Then we’re both fools.” His lips crash against mine, his tongue gliding over the seam. My mouth parts, allowing him inside as I tighten my hold.

“Is that a yes?” he gasps when at last we stop for air.

I pull him down for another kiss. “That’s a yes.”

“When can you be ready?”

I think of the few things I might bring, then toss them to the wind as I think of the time they’ll cost me, the people who might see. “I’m ready now.” The throbbing between my legs agrees, and it cries out with need as I tip my head back, allowing Bertrand to kiss his way down my neck. I gasp when his teeth nip the top of my breast.

“Not soon enough,” he groans, then pulls back with a growl. “Make your way down to the road. I’ll have my driver ready the carriage, and we’ll pick you up there.”

Emboldened by the moment, I reach out and press my gloved hand against his pants, feeling the hard length straining against my palm. “Don’t take too long.”

“Devil take me.” He steals another kiss before tearing himself away. “Go. I’ll be there in a thrice.”

And so I run, dipping below windows and casting numerous glances over my shoulder as I do. Excitement makes me move faster than ever before.

Tonight, I’m defying sense and marrying the man with the blue beard.

Crouched behind the rhododendron, it feels like forever before I hear the clack and clatter of an approaching carriage. It draws to a stop a few feet from where I’m hidden, but I wait until I see Bertrand step down before leaving my hiding place. He pulls me into his arms the moment I’m within reach, but there’s a note of uncertainty in his voice as he whispers, “It’s not too late to change your mind.”

I wrap my hand around his silk necktie and tug, drawing his face level with mine as I press a kiss against his lips. “Never.”

He groans, deepening the kiss as his hands seek my waist, drawing my body flush against his. “You’re far too tempting for your own good, Adelaide Brindamour,” he whispers when he finally relinquishes his hold. His eyes flash as he helps me into the carriage, and for the first time since saying yes, I feel the faintest trickle of unease.

I brush it away, smoothing my skirts as I settle onto the bench. I want this. Want *him*. Bertrand sits beside me, his thigh pressed against mine, and any doubts I have evaporate as our fingers interlace.

The carriage jerks into motion, and I watch through the window as Aunt Charlotte’s estate fades into the distance. “Where are we going, anyway?”

Bertrand lifts our joined hands, pressing the back of mine against his lips. “Not far. I know a vicar who won’t be opposed to us dropping in unannounced. He and his wife will oversee the marriage.”

“And afterward?” I lean into his side and tilt my head as I nip the soft flesh of his earlobe.

A growl rumbles through his chest. “There’s an inn”—he hisses with pleasure as my free hand glides beneath his shirt and over the hard plane of his stomach—“about an hour east where we can stay the night.”

My pinky slips beneath the waistband of his pants. “And if I don’t want to wait?”

His hand clamps onto my wrist, and before I can even blink, I find myself pressed back against the seat cushions, hands pinned above my head as he hovers above with a predatory smirk. “Then I suppose I’ll simply have to pleasure you here and now.”

I gasp as his mouth latches onto my neck, sucking with bruising pressure, and I writhe helplessly beneath him as he shifts his attention lower, one hand holding my wrists while the other slips behind my back and works the tiny buttons holding my dress in place. Despite the intensity of his movements, he doesn’t rip or tear the delicate fabric, and there’s an undercurrent of awe in his voice as he gazes at my breasts, bared and glowing in the moonlight. “Exquisite.”

A soft mew escapes my mouth as he palms one of the aching mounds, the pad of his thumb rubbing the tip and sending spirals of pleasure straight between my legs. He doesn’t linger, however, and I can’t help but frown as he shifts away, releasing his hold on my wrists.

He responds with a wicked grin. “Don’t worry, love, I plan to worship those wondrous tits properly tonight.” He sinks to his knees in front of me.

“When you’re splayed, naked and sopping wet, beneath me.” Long fingers caress my calves, and I bite my lip to keep from exclaiming as he lifts the hem of my dress, rucking it up over my knees. I recall a conversation with Julia, one I’d been too embarrassed to broach with my sister, when I’d ask her how exactly women had relations with other women. While she’d been vague on the details, the overall gist was made.

As Bertrand tugs my undergarments down and gently parts my legs, baring my most private of areas to his hungry gaze, I feel a tight coil of anticipation as I realize he plans to do the same. He’s going to—

“Oh my—” A moan, loud and wanton, fills the carriage as his tongue glides through my folds and flicks the sensitive bud nestled above. I’m intimately familiar with the pleasure it can bring when properly teased, but nothing has prepared me for the feel of his mouth as he sucks it between his lips. And that beard.

May he never, *ever* shave that beard.

Over and over that tongue laps and flicks, teases and twists me into a frenzy. His top hat lies on the floor where my hand has knocked it away in my need for purchase. Fingers tangled in his thick black hair, I grind shamelessly against his face. Later I’ll remember the driver and blush as I recall the noises that emanate from deep in my core, but right now, with his tongue dipping inside my slit and his fingers working my nub like a maestro before his orchestra, all I can do is ride the waves of pleasure as they build to a deafening crash.

He slows to a languid series of kisses as the moment subsides, pressing one first on my tender nub, then the inside of each of my thighs. My breath has yet to calm as he slides the undergarments back on, cupping my backside as he secures them. My skirts fall into place as he removes himself from between my legs, taking one last, long look at my breasts before tucking them away.

I lick my lips as he perches on the bench beside me, brushing my hair over my shoulder before slowly securing each button back into place. I’m desperate to speak, and yet the words won’t form. What does one even say after something like that? Thank you? That was lovely? I glance at his lap, his own arousal obvious in the rigid tenting of his pants.

“Should I…?” Julia hadn’t had anything to say in regards to the male side of things, but my instincts tell me the act he just performed can go both

ways. I bite my lip, trying to picture it in my head. *Where would I put my hands? Do I just kind of lick it or…?*

Bertrand secures the final button and draws me into his side, pressing a kiss against my hair. “You may do whatever manner of wicked things you wish to me,” he murmurs, the deep treble of his voice setting off a fresh wave of delicious tingles. “But you’ll have to wait.” He nods out the window, and I see the faint outline of a stone cottage draped in ivy drawing near. As the carriage rolls to a stop, he takes my hand, voice sober in the hushed darkness.

“Are you ready to become Madame de Montragoux?”

The wedding is short and sweet, the vicar and his wife presiding over the ceremony in their night clothes, a single candlestick casting light on the parchment as they sign their witness. I follow Bertrand’s lead as if in a dream, each moment more surreal than the last. The night drifts into a blissful fog, and it isn’t until I wake the following morning, naked and entangled in a set of white sheets with the cheery noise of birds filling the room and the bright morning sun streaming through the window, that it truly hits me.

I, Adelaide Brindamour, of sound mind and body, have married a complete and utter stranger.

Act Two

In which Adelaide realizes she has, perhaps, been a tad hasty.

16

ADELAIDE

It's funny how I knew Bertrand was French, and yet it never occurred to me that his home would be—surprise, surprise—in France. But as the ship we board this morning pulls away from the harbor (after a whirlwind shopping excursion in Dover the day before), there can be no denying it. I'm leaving everything I know behind to follow this man.

Not just any man—my husband.

"Is your home far from Calais?" I place my hand on Bertrand's arm as he stands, rigid and tense, at the rail. Not clustered with the other passengers waving goodbye to loved ones who fill the air with shouts of "bon voyage" and "safe travels", but staring pensively at the faint outline of France's distant coastline.

He blinks, the tension in his expression disappearing as he looks down at me. The transition is so fast, so seamless, I wonder if I imagined it. If I'm looking for things that aren't there, and letting my own anxieties play games with my head. "*Our* home"—he turns, placing his hands on my hips and gently tugging me closer—"is a full day's ride after we disembark, I'm afraid. We'll have to stay at a hotel tonight before making the trip."

"A hotel doesn't sound too bad." I walk my fingers up his chest and lace them around his neck. "I rather liked the inn we stayed at last night."

"The room was tiny," Bertrand reminds me.

"I thought it was cozy."

“Cozy, was it?” He dips his head, his mouth a breath away from mine. “I’d say it was positively snug.”

I grin against his lips. “I thought you liked snug places. You spent enough time buried in one last night.”

“Not nearly long enough,” he groans, claiming my mouth. I gently suck on his lower lip, and his reaction is immediate as a delicious hardness presses into my stomach. “We should probably… take a look… make sure the room on board is to your… satisfaction.”

Breathless, I pull back just enough to slide my hands down his chest, fingers grasping his lapels. “I couldn’t agree more.”

With one last squeeze, Bertrand releases me as we run giggling into the ship’s hold. He leads me through a maze of hallways until finally coming to a stop in front of one of the numbered doors. But as he moves to slide the key into the lock, his hand shakes. The key clatters to the floor as he drops to his knees.

“Bertrand!” I kneel beside him, panic making my hands flutter about uselessly. I know I should be doing something with them, but I can’t think what. Not when Bertrand’s face has grown so very pale, his knuckles turning white as he clutches his throat. His other hand fumbles inside his jacket.

His tonic, of course. “Let me help you.” I lean forward, reaching for his coat.

He lets out a hiss as he twists away. “I’ve got it.”

“You’re shaking so hard you’ll spill it,” I argue. “Please. I can get it for you.”

A shudder vibrates beneath my hands, and I stumble back as he whips around, a feral gleam lighting his dark eyes. “Leave me.”

“What—”

His voice morphs into a growl. “Go. Now.”

Instinct drives me to my feet, and I’m flying through the hallway. The direction doesn’t matter; I just know I need to get as far away as I can. When I catch a glimpse of blue sky through the window, I surge toward it. A door isn’t far off.

I reach the ship’s railing moments before my breakfast resurfaces.

What was that… look? I wipe my mouth as I slump to the floor, my legs incapable of holding me up any longer. *It almost felt as if*—I squeeze my eyes shut, but the image of Bertrand's expression is burned into the back of my lids—*as if he were an animal on the brink of attack. A… a predator of some sort.* And I'd been the wide-eyed bunny.

"Miss, are you all right?" I look up to see a woman not much older than me watching with concern. The gentleman she's with stands stiffly behind her, looking pointedly away. The woman draws a delicate, white handkerchief from her clutch and bends down as she offers it to me. "The waves upset my stomach as well, sometimes," she says kindly.

I accept the bit of fabric without thinking, fingers numb as they go through the motions of dabbing my mouth. "Thank you." Clutching the railing, I force myself back to my feet. I can only imagine how I must look to these people. I'm an absolute mess. "It's my first time on a ship," I explain. *My first time having the wits scared out of me by something other than a ghost.* I hold the handkerchief out, but she waves it away.

"Keep it. I packed more than I can possibly use as it is."

"Truer words have never been spoken," the man chimes in, smiling briefly at the woman before once again looking away.

"Quiet you," the woman giggles, swatting his arm. To me she asks, "Can we get you anything? A cup of tea, perhaps?"

"No, I… I think I'll just head inside and freshen up." I should probably check on Bertrand. Already I'm questioning my need to run. So he snapped at me. He was ill, of course he'd snap. That doesn't make him *dangerous*. I nod, determination taking root. "Yes, I believe some rest will set me to rights." I muster a grin as I press a hand against my stomach. "Good thing we're merely crossing the Channel."

"Goodness, yes," the woman agrees. "Can you imagine taking one of these things all the way to America? I'd die."

"Death would be preferable to setting foot in that rat-infested country," the man beside her sniffs. "Why anyone would want to travel there is beyond me."

"To discover new things, broaden their horizons." The woman rolls her eyes at me, a teasing grin pulling at her lips. "Personally, I'd love to explore the Wild West. Maybe even meet a handsome cowboy or two."

I smile as the couple spirals into a lively debate, slipping away as they argue whether Buffalo Bill qualifies as cultural entertainment. Between the

sun, sea air, and their carefree banter fading away behind me, I find I'm much calmer now than I was when I came tearing out. *He'll have taken his tonic by now,* I assure myself as I retrace our steps from earlier, making my way back to the room. *As his wife, I should be there to take care of him.*

Turning the corner, I spy my blue-bearded husband slumped against the door to our room. His top hat rests on the floor beside him as he tunnels nervous fingers through his hair. He looks up at my approach, and any remaining worry melts away in the face of his contrition.

"Adelaide, darling. I'm so sorry." He springs to his feet, looking surprisingly robust for a man who'd just recently been on the brink of collapse. Once again, I wonder if my mind exaggerated it.

"Shh, it's all right." I step into the circle of his arms, allowing him to pull me close. He presses desperate kisses against my hair as he holds me.

"My condition can be intense at times. If I forget to take my tonic, it can overwhelm me. It's not an excuse for shouting at you, of course. Just an explanation, and an apology if you'll accept it."

I place my palm against his cheek. "Consider it forgotten." I hesitate, searching his face for any sign of lingering pain. "You're feeling better now?"

"Splendid, now that you're here."

"Good." I cover my mouth before he has a chance to kiss it. "Now let me in the room so I can freshen up. I lost my breakfast in the Channel."

Bertrand grimaces as he opens the door. "Can I get you anything?"

"Yes." I smirk. "You." He grins, once again leaning in to kiss me. I give him a playful push before sashaying into the room. "*After* I've cleaned up."

17

ADELAIDE

We arrive in Calais that evening, where a carriage delivers us to the Hôtel Meurice. For someone who grew up on the outskirts of the British elite, titled yes but never truly well off, walking through the ornate lobby and passing guests dressed in the finest fashions is like a dream. I've never considered myself vain, but I'll admit to being grateful for our last-minute shopping trip in Dover. At least I don't stick out too dreadfully.

"This is…" I spin in a circle, arms stretched wide as I take in the grand room Bertrand and I will be staying in. "Unbelievable." I drop my arms to my sides as I face him. "It's beautiful, Bertrand, but I would have been content with less."

"I know." His gaze warms my skin as it roams, caressing every inch of me. "But I want to make you the happiest woman in the world. At least"—his expression shutters—"as long as it's in my power to do so."

"Hmm." I narrow my eyes. "That's both incredibly sweet and oddly cryptic."

His mouth ticks up in a crooked grin that practically begs me to kiss him. "What can I say? You've married a complicated man."

"So I'm discovering." The urge to lean in, to give myself over to the pleasures his mouth promises is strong, and yet… "We'll arrive at your home tomorrow." I focus on his necktie, occupying my hands as I loosen the bit of black silk.

His lips ghost my hair. "That's right."

“You haven’t really said much about it.” I glance up at him and find some of the warmth drained from his face, replaced by an edge of tension. I swallow. “What’s it like?”

His hands settle on my hips, drawing me in as he bites the soft flesh of my earlobe. “Big.”

Why does that feel so good? A moan builds in my chest, but I stamp it down. *Do not let yourself be distracted.* “Surely you can do better than that,” I protest, pressing my hands against his chest as he works his way down my neck. “I’m going to live there, after all. I’d like to know a little something about it.” *About you.*

He rests his head on my shoulder with a sigh. “Fine. Château de Montragoux has belonged to my family for the entirety of its existence, built by some great-great relative or another. To be honest, I never paid much attention to my tutor’s history lessons. I prefer reading fiction, the more outrageous the better. I have a small but loyal staff who mostly keep to themselves with the exception of Ricard, my valet, who has a tendency to skulk about in the shadows wherever I go. The building itself is cold and drafty, and I keep a significant portion closed off as I have no use for either it or the larger staff that would be required to maintain it.”

He lifts his head and gives me a pleading look. “Now, is that enough to satisfy your curiosity for tonight? Because I had a rather different activity in mind, Madame de Montragoux. One that involves less interrogation and more”—his hands slide up my waist, thumbs brushing the underside of my breasts—“stimulation.”

There are a dozen questions or more perched on the tip of my tongue, but my mouth fills with sawdust as he peels off his jacket and tosses it to the side, those dark eyes holding mine captive as he slowly unbuttons his shirt. When that, too, hits the floor, and I’m left facing a wall of lean, sculpted muscle, any further questions are scattered like dust in the wind.

It hardly matters, anyway. We’ll be there tomorrow, and I have an entire carriage ride to learn about my future home. I bite my lip as his trousers fall to the floor. *Oh yes. Questions can* definitely *wait.*

THE TRIP the next day is, in fact, quite long, and would have been the perfect opportunity to learn more about Bertrand and Château de Montragoux had Bertrand not clammed up the moment the wheels started turning. Hours later, he has yet to utter more than a few words in response to my slowly thinning questions. His brooding silence is wreaking havoc on my nerves.

It wouldn't be so bad if I had Whisper with me. My lap feels empty without my ghostly companion curled there, but I have yet to see her since running off from Madame Gossard's. I glance at Bertrand, who's taken to gripping his flask as he stares out the window, and recall the way Whisper hissed at him in the orangery. *I wonder why she doesn't like him. Because he's a man? Or perhaps she resents sharing my attention?* Either way, I'm left without my dearest friend.

I trace the silver threads woven into my fancy new dress as I try to come up with something to say, but it's Bertrand for once who breaks the silence.

"We're here."

We're here. I take a deep breath as I scoot closer to the window and squint in the waning light. The road winds along a cliff, steadily sloping downward as our carriage rattles precariously close to the edge. As if on cue, a splatter of rain pings the roof, followed by another. When it begins to rain in earnest, I feel certain one of the horses is going to slip over the side, dooming us to die as we crash into the rocks below.

They don't, and the carriage draws to a stop on a narrow scrap of beach located at the base of the cliff. A moment later the door swings open to an ominous crack of thunder, and the driver's craggy face appears.

"High tide, Monsieur. The land bridge is completely submerged. You'll have to take the dinghy."

I gape over his shoulder at the tiny rowboat tethered to a post in the water. *He's not serious?*

Bertrand gives him a terse nod as he climbs out into the rain, unfazed by the turn of events. "Take the carriage back to Lentville stables, and see that the horses are properly cared for. You can bring them along tomorrow morning when the passage clears."

"Yes, sir."

Bertrand turns to me. "There's an umbrella in the compartment beneath your seat. I apologize for the messy arrival, but I promise I'm an excellent rower. We'll be quite safe." A flash of lightning illuminates his face, and

there's something in the way he avoids meeting my eyes that makes me doubt that last bit.

You always said you'd die if you were to marry a boring man. I lift the bench and pull out a black umbrella before accepting Bertrand's outstretched hand. *Let's hope marrying an exciting one doesn't result in the same outcome.*

The wind does its best to steal my umbrella away as I struggle to get it open. Bertrand and the driver have already moved to the boat, and Bertrand is stationing himself at the oars as the driver unties the thick rope securing it to the post. I hurry toward them as I clutch my umbrella, angling it the best I can against the wind and rain. Now that I'm free of the carriage, I can see the silhouette of a building rising up from the water, and as another bolt of lightning flashes, my jaw hinges at the sight of it.

It looms over the tiny island like a vulture, with sharp turrets stabbing the stormy sky above. Just looking at it makes me feel cold. A château? No, this dark sentinel isn't a château. Châteaus are whimsical, beautiful buildings. This—*this* is a bloody castle. I fold myself into the boat, back rigid as I stare across the wooden dinghy at my husband. The streaks in his beard stand out even in the dark, and his expression is grim as he turns the oars, propelling us out into the choppy water. Taking us to his castle.

Bluebeard's Castle.

I'm properly soaked by the time Bertrand ushers me up the steps leading to the looming building. A single light punctures the darkness, hovering at the top of the hill like a fairy luring us to our deaths. *Don't be so dramatic, Adelaide. You're letting the storm get you worked up over nothing.*

Indeed, as I trudge up the final steps, all I find at the top is an old man in a fraying suit holding a lantern. His wrinkled mouth is puckered, and I suspect he's missing most of his teeth. Still, his smile is warm and inviting as we approach, and I breathe a bit easier as he lets us inside.

And then I hear it.

Mournful wails vibrate through the walls, and I freeze, bracing myself for the inevitable rush of spirits. When none appear, I turn to Bertrand with wide, questioning eyes. He gives his head a subtle shake, glancing at the old man who seems oblivious to the spectral noises. *All right. I'll hold my questions—for now. But later I'm going to need answers, damn it.* I try to convey as much with my eyes, but from the way Bertrand's lips twitch—the

first sign of a smile all day—I suspect the feeling I'm giving off is more angry kitten than menacing. I'll have to work on my glare.

Bertrand rests a hand on my lower back as he turns to the old man. "Edgar, I'd like you to meet my bride, Madame Adelaide de Montragoux. Adelaide, this is my butler, Edgar Durand."

"A pleasure to meet the new mistress," Edgar says, taking my dripping umbrella with a bow.

"The pleasure is mine," I reply, attempting to keep my voice even despite the keening sound that continues to fill the entry hall.

Edgar turns to Bertrand. "I expect you'll want her to clean up before heading to the tower. I'll have Louise prepare a bath in her room." He glances at my soaked dress and adds, "There should be an assortment of clothes in there, as well. I'm sure she can find something suitable to use until your trunks arrive."

And apparently I'm the equivalent of a house pet for all this man is concerned. Wonderful. And what's all this about a tower? I open my mouth to ask that very question, but Bertrand beats me to it.

"Actually, Edgar, Adelaide will be sharing my room, so you can tell Louise to prepare the bath in there. As for the tower, it'll have to wait. The trip was long, and I'm tired."

"But, sir." Edgar pales, his round eyes darting up the stairwell. "You're expected…"

"It. Can. Wait." Bertrand gives the butler a look that forbids any further discussion on the subject.

Edgar swallows. "As you say, sir."

"Now then." I let out a squeal as Bertrand scoops me into his arms, and he returns my surprised gaze with a wink. "It's high time I showed you the master suite."

I vaguely note Edgar clucking with disapproval as Bertrand carries me up the stairs, but it's the weeping ghosts I'm more concerned with. It must show on my face, as Bertrand dips his head, lips brushing my ear as he whispers, "They'll settle down soon. It's the storm stirring them up, is all. They're really quite harmless, I promise."

I nod against his chest, my arms wrapping around him. I have nothing to gain by doubting him, so I choose to trust instead. To believe that everything is going to be fine, just fine.

18

ADELAIDE

For the next three days, we remain sequestered in Bertrand's—that is, *our*—chambers. The storm that struck upon our arrival persists, with the howling wind and pounding rain blending seamlessly with the moans that drift through the walls each night, to the point where the sounds have become almost soothing. And while I'm curious about the rest of the castle, its exploration can wait. Draped over the chaise lounge in nothing but a silk robe with Bertrand's skilled fingers and industrious tongue between my legs, I'm content to linger in our love nest for the time being.

As Bertrand feasts on me like a man half-starved, my own cries join the cacophony, and it isn't until the last wave of pleasure ebbs that I hear the persistent knocking. I blush as I secure my robe. *How long has someone been standing out there?* It seems too much to hope my unrestrained noises might have been lost amid the din.

Bertrand licks his lips as he stands. "Stay right there," he commands, grinning wickedly. "I'm not even close to being done with you."

I sink into the chaise, hands layered over my burning face. "Bertrand, please. They'll hear you."

"Too bad for them, because I'm not planning to share."

"*Bertrand.* The door."

He smirks, giving me a last, lingering look before turning to admit our visitor. "Yes to the cakes but no on the tea. I think we'd both prefer wine tonight," he says, looking far too tempting with his mussed hair and low-

slung pants. I wish he'd put a shirt on first. Louise, the maid who's been attending us, is young and delicately beautiful. I can't help but feel a stab of jealousy when I see the two of them together, which is ridiculous seeing as they haven't shown even an ounce of interest in each other. I clench my fist, the urge to push Bertrand aside and scratch the girl's eyes out for daring to look upon him in his current state making me tense.

What is wrong with you? She's just doing her job.

A man's gruff voice interrupts my unsettling thoughts. "You know damn well I'm not here to bring you any bloody cakes."

I know that voice. It belongs to Bertrand's valet, Ricard. I met him briefly the morning after we arrived, when he came to see if Bertrand needed anything. After which they'd proceeded to hold a hushed conversation in the hallway that ended with Ricard stomping off in a huff. *He's awfully bold for a servant,* I muse. *I don't think I've ever heard a valet speak so brazenly before.*

Bertrand, however, seems unperturbed by his man's lack of decorum. "If you're not here to feed us, I suggest you bugger off. My wife and I are occupied at the moment."

"That's why I'm here, sir." Ricard's voice drops, and I can barely hear his next words. "It's been three days, and you've yet to bring her up to the tower."

Bertrand's reply is a low growl. "We're busy."

"The stores are empty," Ricard persists in a hushed whisper. "There won't be any refills until you do."

I can see the muscles ripple along Bertrand's back as he tenses. Holding my breath, I lean forward, straining to hear.

"I have enough," Bertrand hisses.

"For now, perhaps," Ricard argues. "But how much longer?" There's a pause before he adds, "You're putting us all at risk. I hope she's worth it."

Bertrand doesn't respond, and retreating footfalls are the only indication of Ricard's departure as he continues to stand there, staring out into the hallway. I bite my lip, worry eating at my gut as I watch him. "Is… everything all right?"

A beat and then he sighs, the tension shedding as he turns. A smile plays at the corner of his mouth as he prowls toward me. "Never better, now that he's gone and I can get back to ravishing my beautiful wife."

My center throbs in response, and I squeeze my legs together. “Are you sure? Your valet sounded worried.”

“Ricard”—he scoops me off the lounge and carries me to the bed—“can go fuck himself.” He drops me onto the mattress and shucks his pants off before crawling over me. There’s a dark, desperate heat in his eyes that makes me shiver, even as my body instinctively responds, thighs splaying open as he moves between them. He pins my arms over my head as he lowers his head, teeth grazing my neck as he growls, “Just like I’m going to fuck you."

Any further concerns shatter with pleasure as he slams inside me.

I WAKE to the sound of birds chirping outside the window; the storm has finally passed. But when I roll onto my side, the space beside me is empty.

“Bertrand?”

I push myself up, craning to see around the partially open door to the toilettes, but it appears to be empty as well. *I suppose it* is *past time to leave the room.* Although, I’ll admit to being a bit miffed that he left without waking me. Stretching my arms overhead with a yawn, a tray laid out at the table catches my eye. *Has Louise already been here?* I blush, crossing my arms over my bare chest. Had I been under the blankets when I woke? I can’t recall for sure, but I suspect not. I determine then and there to sleep with my nightgown on, regardless of Bertrand’s preferences. *Or insist that he locks the door when he leaves.*

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and pause, fingers brushing my neck. A purple bruise marks the porcelain flesh, accented by the faint scratch of teeth, and a tendril of delicious pleasure spirals through my core when I press it. *Or perhaps I should persuade him to wake me before he goes,* I muse, a smile curving my swollen lips as I trace circles around the broken skin. My body hums as I picture all the different ways he could do so, my favorite involving me lying face down as he—

I snatch my dressing gown off the bed as someone raps at the door.

“Madame?”

Louise. I shove my arms through the sleeves of the silk wrapper, cinching it at the waist as I saunter over to the breakfast tray. “Come in,” I

call, plucking a strawberry off the tray and sinking my teeth into its juicy ripeness. A folded note leaning against the tea pot catches my eye, and I pick it up as Louise bustles in. Bertrand's valet, Ricard, and a man I'm fairly certain was the driver who retrieved Bertrand and I from the dock follow behind with my trunk, and I hastily brush my hair over my shoulder, hiding the scandalous mark on my neck.

"The passing finally cleared, so Griffon was able to bring your things over," Louise explains, gesturing for the men to place the trunk beside the armoire.

"Wonderful, thank you." I smile as the men nod gruffly. They turn to go as soon as their load is settled, but Ricard pauses briefly in the doorway, giving Louise a pointed look before he leaves. A flicker of nerves passes over her delicate face, but it's soon gone, replaced by her usual cheery efficiency.

"I imagine it'll be nice to wear your own things again," she says, getting straight to work as she opens the trunk and begins taking out my newly purchased wardrobe. She smooths each item before hanging them in the armoire.

"Oh, I don't know. This dressing gown has served me well enough the past few days." I smile as I unfold the note, spying Bertrand's looping signature at the bottom.

"It does look comfortable," Louise admits. "Though a bit impractical for anywhere outside of the bedroom." She pauses. "You are planning to leave the bedroom today, are you not?"

"Hmm?" I glance up from the note, which begins with a rather scintillating description of what Bertrand has planned for me upon his return. I blush. "Oh, um, yes. Yes, of course. I should like to tour the castle and take in the grounds now that the weather has cleared." I return to my note, scanning it for some indication of where exactly my husband will be returning from, but that part seems rather vague. "Louise? Do you know where Monsieur de Montragoux has gone off to this morning? I can't decide if I should wait for him or go ahead and explore on my own."

"I believe he went into town," Louise replies. "It could be quite a while before he returns. I wouldn't wait, if I were you."

"No, I suppose not." I trace his signature, gaze dropping to the postscript at the bottom of the paper. *My home is your home, so feel free to*

enter wherever you wish with one exception—by no means are you to go into the North Tower. Trust me when I tell you it isn't safe.

Isn't safe? I frown. Perhaps it's in need of maintenance. No matter. The castle is vast enough as it is. In fact, the more I think of it, the more eager I am to begin my explorations. "Louise, would you mind setting one of those out? I'd like to get dressed straight away."

"Of course, Madame. Would you like me to put your hair up as well?"

I glance in the mirror, noting the way my long, dark curls spill about my shoulders. Julien would have a fit if he saw me walking about with my hair loose like this. I wonder how he took the news of my disappearance. Not well, I'm sure. I feel a trickle of guilt that I left without leaving a note. Hopefully Marguerite will have guessed what I've done. *I should send them a letter, regardless, to let them know I'm happy and well.* I should have sent one days ago, but reason seems to evade me whenever Bertrand is near. I vow to send them a message before he returns and sweeps me under his spell once more.

19

ADELAIDE

The sun is so inviting that I have Louise swap out her initial dress choice—a deep red gown with a plunging neckline, complete with black lace accents—for a simple cotton one. Her nose wrinkles as she lays the plain purple dress on the bed, but I couldn't care less. From what I can see from the window, the surrounding terrain is anything but smooth, and I have no desire to pick my way over rocks and sand in a fussy silk number.

It'll be boots and cotton for me, thank you.

As soon as she leaves, I scrounge up paper and ink from the desk and set to writing a missive to send home. It proves more difficult than expected, as every word I pen comes off flippant and ungrateful, when all I really wish to convey is that I'm happy with my choice and hope they'll accept it in time. In Bertrand's absence, I've begun to feel the first twinges of homesickness. My brothers were obnoxious boars half the time, but Marguerite was my closest (living) friend.

I miss her.

I settle on a few brief sentences letting them know where I am and not to worry, promising myself that I'll go into more detail in the next letter. Folding the stationary, I tuck it into a small envelope made of matching parchment before sliding the entire thing into a second one of sturdy, ivory stock and sealing it with a bit of red wax. I grab a straw hat from one of the boxes stacked inside the armoire and tuck the letter inside one of the deep

pockets sewn into my dress—a feature that led me to choosing the frock in the first place. Good pockets are hard to come by in ladies' fashion.

Now, to figure out where they leave the post.

I should have asked Louise. I peek into the hallway, looking up and down for any sign of life. Or, more specifically, afterlife. The ghostly moans ceased upon the storm's conclusion, and it's been quiet all morning. Still, I'd rather not run into any surprise specters.

Let's see… we came in from the right, I believe. I attempt to retrace Bertrand's steps as he carried me up to the room that first night, but it doesn't take more than a few turns for me to feel lost. It doesn't help that everything looks the same—stone walls void of decoration, floors bare of even the smallest scrap of rug. Truly, the only things that change from one hallway to the next are the shape and placement of the many, *many* cobwebs that cling to each and every corner and ledge. *I'm guessing this place doesn't have a housekeeper*, I muse, running a finger along one of the windowsills and leaving a trail in the heavy layer of dust. *Or at least, not a very good one.*

Now that I think of it, I haven't seen much in the way of staff at all. There's Louise, of course, who seems to be responsible for the upkeep of the master suite. And Ricard, Bertrand's valet, although I've yet to see him attend my husband in any of the traditional valet roles. Instead, he seems to be more of an all-around errand boy whose main task is giving me the creeps. I picture his beady eyes stealing glances at me and shiver.

There's the driver, Griffon. I wonder if he lives here at the castle or back on the mainland. There's certainly room enough for him to stay on site. *And there must be a cook*, I reason. No working castle could get by without one of those, and *someone's* been sending delicious meals up to the room. *Them and Edgar, the butler, make five.* I frown. *There must be more than that. This place is far too big for such a small staff. You just haven't met them since you've been squirreled away in your room.*

I vow to keep my eyes peeled for new faces.

A staircase brings me down to the main foyer, and I silently cheer as I see a tailcoat whisking out of sight. Hurrying after it, I call, "Edgar! A moment please."

The butler limps back into the room, his wrinkled hand gripping the head of his cane. "Madame de Montragoux. I was beginning to think I'd imagined your arrival."

There's accusation in his voice, and my face warms beneath his steely gaze. *You're the lady of the house, Adelaide. You don't need to explain yourself.* Still, the words come tumbling out. "Monsieur de Montragoux and I have been enjoying a stay-at-home honeymoon. I'm sure you can understand."

The way his lips twist at my words suggests he very much does not. "You're here now, anyway. Come, I'll take you up to the tower." He gestures for me to follow him, but I hesitate, thinking of Bertrand's postscript.

"The tower? Whatever for?"

He frowns, clearly annoyed by the fact that I'm not blindly following his lead. "It's customary."

"Customary to enter a tower?" I drawl, infusing my voice with every ounce of dubious confusion I feel.

"Yes," he replies emphatically. "Now, come along."

By no means are you to go into the North Tower. "Which tower do you mean?" I ask, inching toward the door. "There are so many rooms here, I don't know how I'll keep track of them all."

"It doesn't matter which tower," Edgar snaps. "Just do as you're told."

I stiffen. If I can turn my nose up at my own brother's commands, there's no bloody way I'm going to cower before a butler I barely know. Besides, he looks frail enough that a stiff wind could knock him over at any moment. I needn't fear him overpowering me. "I mean to get some fresh air this morning," I sniff. "I'm sure this… tower… can wait until Bertrand returns and we can go up together."

I turn on my heel and stride out the front door, leaving him sputtering in my wake.

The ground is soft and damp from the prolonged rain, and I'm doubly grateful for my leather boots as I maneuver my way around the castle's perimeter. It sits atop a hill, allowing for a panoramic view of the ocean and the strip of beach connecting it to the mainland. Thin trenches and hoof prints mark the path of the wagon that delivered our trunks. *I wonder if Bertrand had to take the boat to shore this morning or if the tide had already cleared?*

I stare at the mainland's cliffs a moment longer, hoping to spy his return. I can't put my finger on why, but something about this place makes

me uneasy. I didn't notice it when we were ensconced in our room, but now that I'm alone…

Awareness pricks at the back of my neck, and I turn, shielding my eyes against the sun as I search the castle windows. *I could have sworn someone was watching me just now.* Nothing but empty panes. I shake my head as I resume my trek over the mossy grass. A life filled with seeing ghosts has made me paranoid.

I make it all the way to the rear of the castle when a wall rises in front of me. It's broken by a single archway where an iron gate bars entrance to what appears to be a terribly neglected garden. Dead vines cling to the stone walls and the flower beds are overrun with bushy green weeds. I give the gate a tug and it swings open with a rusty creak.

I'm guessing Bertrand doesn't employ a gardener.

It must have been an age since someone last tended this place, and I try to imagine how it'd look with a little love and proper care. I sit on the edge of the fountain, wrinkling my nose at the smell wafting up from the stagnant water. It's thick with rotting leaf litter and coated with a slimy green substance, but the marble structure itself is beautiful. *This entire garden could be beautiful.* My lips curve into a smile. *I could* make *this place beautiful.*

I sit up straighter, looking over the tangled beds with renewed interest. *Well, why not? I've never grown anything before, but I'm sure I could figure out the basics. Such as clearing out these weeds. And there's bound to be a library in a castle this size. Perhaps it has a book on gardening.*

A soft mew interrupts my planning, and my heart explodes with relief as a wispy white feline appears at my feet, rubbing her head against my shins. "Whisper!" I scoop the cat into my arms and press my face into her fur. "You came back." My voice cracks, the loneliness I'd been refusing to acknowledge crashing over me in a wave of emotion. "*You came back*."

I move my face away, drinking in her familiar features. "Where have you been? I was worried I'd lost you for good." She mews, flicking her tail. "You missed my wedding, you know." A soft purr as I scratch between her ears. "Well, wedding might be stretching it a bit. It was more of a simple ceremony. Still, it would have been nice to have you there with me." She rolls onto her back, and I dutifully switch to rubbing her belly. "I've missed you," I add in a whisper. Her gaze meets mine, and I can see my words reflected in her eyes.

I clear my throat. “So. What do you think of our new home?”

Whisper stretches and hops off my lap as she takes dainty steps around the fountain’s rim.

I trail along behind her. “I was thinking I might try fixing up this garden. Assuming I can get my hands on some tools. Perhaps I’ll even ask Bertrand to take me into town to see about purchasing some seeds or…” I glance around the messy space. Is it too late in the season for seeds? Julia started working on her garden months ago. “Flowers that can be replanted?” I sigh. “I suppose my first task will have to be studying up on the whole process, as I haven’t the faintest idea what I’m doing.”

A wail drifts down from the castle, and Whisper freezes in place, fur puffing and tail shooting straight up. I grimace. “You heard that too?” I rub my arms as goose-flesh pricks my skin. “Bertrand says they’re harmless, but the way they go on sometimes…” I shiver. “I haven’t seen them yet, but I’ve barely been outside of the master chambers.” I give Whisper a rueful look. “To be honest, it’s one of the reasons I decided to start my explorations out of doors. I’d rather have Bertrand with me should I happen to stumble upon any of them. Harmless or not.”

Whisper finally relents in her stare down of the castle, allowing me to pick her up and cradle her in my arms as I stroll about the abandoned garden, but she immediately tenses, claws piercing my flesh, when Bertrand’s voice cuts through our companionable silence.

“There you are.”

I turn to find him leaning inside the arched doorway, a crooked smile on his face. There’s a note of relief in his voice that makes me wonder how long he’s been looking for me. I offer him a smile of my own. “Just taking in your luxurious gardens,” I tease, carefully extricating Whisper’s claws from my dress.

“Ah yes. They really do put Madame Gossard’s to shame, do they not?” Bertrand laughs, pushing off the wall. He strolls toward me, and I frown as Whisper hisses in his direction. He pauses. “I see your friend finally found her way here,” he says, giving the cat a friendly smile. “Although she has yet to warm up to her new father.”

Whisper gives him one last hiss before disappearing. My empty arms fall to my sides, and I feel a pang of loneliness at the sudden departure that reminds me of the letter tucked deep inside my pocket. *Is my family feeling something similar since I left?*

“She’ll come around,” I murmur, pulling the envelope from my dress. *As will my siblings,* I promise myself, fingering the thick paper. I hold it up. “I wrote to my family this morning, but I’m not sure where to put the outgoing post.”

Bertrand closes the distance between us, plucking the envelope from my hand as he bends down and presses a kiss against my forehead. “Leave it to me. I’ll make sure it’s delivered as soon as possible.”

I lean into his chest, the stress and loneliness I felt earlier drifting away as his strong arms wrap around me. Even the overgrown garden feels lovelier now, a wild beauty shining through the mess. Bertrand’s lips brush my neck, and I tilt my head back with a sigh of pleasure as the world melts away.

All I ever need is this.

20

ADELAIDE

Bertrand spent the rest of the day showing me around the castle—or at least, the sections that were open. The west wing was entirely shut off, as was the North Tower. Bertrand hovered outside the door for a long moment, his hand drifting to his jacket pocket, but in the end he merely checked to make sure it was locked before emphatically reminding me it was off limits.

The mournful wails echoed the loudest behind that door.

Now I toss in my sleep, unable to shake the ghostly keening from my mind. *What manner of restless souls reside there?* I recall the icy grip of the woman in the lake, her fingers wrapped around my ankle as she pulled me beneath the surface, and shiver. *Does the tower hold one of those spirits? One who would see me drawn to a matching fate?* I stare at the arched ceiling above the bed, tracing the shadows that dance in the hazy moonlight. *If there is, why does everyone aside from Bertrand seem so eager for me to go up there?* I roll onto my side, reaching for him, but all I find are rumpled sheets and an abandoned pillow.

"Bertrand?"

I push myself upright, searching the dimly lit space for my missing husband. Candlelight flickers from within the toilettes, so I slip out of bed and pad across the room to tap on the door. "Bertrand? Are you unwell?" There's no response, so I crack the door open and peek inside—and immediately slap a hand over my mouth to stifle the horrified shriek that erupts from my lungs.

A pale arm ravaged with punctures dangles over the edge of the clawfoot tub, where my husband lies propped up in nothing more than a scrap of undergarments, his head rolling back over the rim as empty eyes stare at the ceiling. Blood trickles from the corners of his mouth.

This isn't right, isn't natural.

Every cell in my body is urging me to run, to flee this accursed place and beg my family to take me back.

I made a mistake. I…

My heart aches as I inch closer to the tub, tears streaming down my face.

I married a man who needs me, now more than ever.

"Bertrand?" I let my fingertips whisper across his face, gently stroking his beard as I tilt his head to meet my gaze. The subtle rise and fall of his chest assures me he's alive, but those eyes refuse to focus as they meet mine. They stare straight through me as if I'm not even here. As if I'm nothing more than an apparition. A ghost.

I smooth a hand over his hair, heart breaking as I whisper, "Bertrand, what have you done to yourself?"

He blinks, a flicker of recognition lighting his eyes, and I latch onto it for all I'm worth, stroking his cheek as I whisper sweet words, words of support and encouragement. Words to let him know I'm here, that he's not alone. That I love him. He stirs beneath my touch, the clouds gradually clearing from his eyes, and I almost weep with relief when his raspy voice mumbles my name.

"Adelaide?"

"Yes, Bertrand. It's me. I've got you."

"Adelaide. I feared…" He swallows, tongue darting out as he tastes the blood on his lips with a grimace. "I feared it wouldn't be enough. I… I don't want to hurt you. Don't want *her* to hurt you." His gaze hardens. "I won't let her touch you, Adelaide. Not this time."

I brush back the clump of disheveled hair that's fallen over his eyes. "What are you talking about? No one's going to hurt me." I trace the bloody trails drying on his arm. "How did this happen? Does it have anything to do with your illness?"

"It was… an experiment." His gaze shifts away, avoiding my eyes. "I needed to buy some time."

Surely he doesn't mean… "Bertrand." His name slips out on a gasp as the implications behind his words sink in. "Did you do this to yourself on purpose? What were you thinking?"

His face darkens as he pulls his arm away, sitting up in the empty tub. "I did what I had to."

I can't look away from his arm, the self-inflicted mutilation. Why? What purpose could such destruction serve? The questions build, fighting for position at the tip of my tongue, but I swallow them all in face of Bertrand's expression.

I'll find no answers here.

"At least let me clean it up," I murmur, lightly touching his shoulder.

He sighs, reluctantly nodding toward the vanity on the other side of the toilettes. "I keep some medical supplies in the bottom drawer. You should be able to find clean bandages, as well as a bottle of iodine for disinfecting."

I cross the tiled floor and rummage through the vanity until I find the needed items, but as I slide the drawer closed, a glint of metal lying on the floor in the corner catches my eye. *What's this?* Cradling the bandages and ointment in my arms, I pause to take a closer look. A silver flask lies abandoned, its cap unscrewed. *Bertrand's tonic.* I pluck it off the floor and give it a shake—empty. Glancing at Bertrand, I assure myself he isn't looking before holding the flask up to my nose and taking a tentative sniff.

Ugh. It smells like old coins and… I wrinkle my nose as I attempt to place the underlying fragrance. *Is that…licorice?* Stoppering the bottle with my fingertip, I turn it upside down and shake. After a moment, I feel a drop of moisture wet my skin. I remove my hand, examining the droplet of tonic beaded atop my finger. *Such a beautiful shade of blue.*

My lips part, the strangest urge to taste it prompting me to bring my hand closer.

"Don't!"

I fumble, bandages and bottles spilling across the floor as I turn wide eyes to the bath. Bertrand has pulled himself up, and his face twists in a pained grimace as he hoists himself out of the tub and staggers toward me. I'm too stunned to even think of moving as he grabs my wrist, holding it in place. "Don't taste it, don't touch it." Fear licks at his pupils as his grip tightens. "Don't even look at it. Do you hear me?"

"Y-yes," I manage to whisper through chattering teeth. "I hear you."

“I pray that you do.” He loosens his hold, some of the tension easing from his frame as his gaze drops to my fingertip. Fear bleeds into desire as he stares at the pinprick of blue, and I suck in a breath as his lips wrap around the extended digit, gently sucking as his pupils dilate. He sinks to the floor when he’s done, leaning against the wall with all of the fortitude of a rag doll. “It’s a poison, Adelaide. You mustn’t let it taint you.”

I take slow, calming breaths as I grab a washcloth from the vanity and move to the sink. *Focus on his arm. Nothing else matters.* My hand shakes as it reaches for the knob, and my eyes sting as I soak the cloth beneath the stream of water. *No more tears, Adelaide. Your husband needs you.* I kneel beside him, positioning myself by his injured arm as I begin tenderly wiping away the dried blood. He winces as the cloth moves over his skin, but he holds still, allowing me to clean him. Thankfully, the glass casing on the bottle of iodine was thick enough to withstand being dropped onto the tiles without shattering, and I retrieve it from the floor once the blood is fully removed. But as I dab the dark liquid over the mass of punctures, I find my tongue loosening despite my resolve to stay focused.

“Why must you take it if it’s poisonous?” My gaze skips from each red circle, mapping them like stars in the sky as I try to keep my voice steady. As if I’m not on the brink of despair. “What sort of illness do you have?” I hold my breath, waiting for his answer as I cut a length of gauze and wrap it carefully around his arm.

“It’s complicated. You wouldn’t understand.”

I snip the next length with a bit more gusto than necessary, frustration pursing my lips. “I’m a clever woman. Try me.”

“Adelaide, please. Just leave it.”

“Just leave it,” I repeat, the nonchalance I’d been striving for gone in a blink. “*Just leave it?*” I tear the remaining length with a loud rip, tying it off as I hiss, “You are my husband, Bertrand. My husband who I found lying in the bathtub in the middle of the night covered in blood, for goodness’ sake. Do not ask me to leave it. Just tell me what the hell is going on. Are you—” I choke on an angry sob and rub a hand over my eyes, dashing the offending tears away as I whisper, “Are you going to leave me so soon? After we’ve only just found each other?”

Bertrand pulls me into his arms as the floodgates open, my body shaking from the onslaught of relentless sobs. He holds me close, stroking

my hair and whispering assurances, our earlier positions reversed. “No, Adelaide, no. I’m not going anywhere. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“How can it be fine?” I choke, blubbering into his chest. “You’re out of tonic. That’s why you hurt yourself. It keeps you balanced somehow, doesn’t it? This poison you consume.”

“Something like that. But you’re not to worry. I’ll get more. That’s why I left this morning. To make the arrangements. I should have what I need by tomorrow, and then everything will be perfect again. You’ll see.”

“You promise?” I sniff, pulling back so that I can look him straight in the eyes. Those dark, dark eyes brimming with untold secrets.

They blink innocently back at me. “I promise.”

“And no more of this?” I ask, ghosting his bandaged arm with my fingertips.

He catches my hand as it reaches his, lifting it to his mouth so he can kiss each of the delicate, white knuckles. “No more bleeding in the tub. Only bubbles and hot baths from now on, I swear.”

I sigh, melting back into his arms. Trusting that he means what he says. Because truly, the alternative is too cruel to bear.

21

ADELAIDE

Bertrand leaves again the next day, but not before showing me to the library and helping me locate a book on gardening. He seems delighted that I've taken an interest in the grounds and is already boasting how we'll have the most glorious garden in all of France. When I told him that was highly unlikely, he replied that at the very least I'll have a convenient place to dispose of his body should I ever have need. I'm fairly certain he was joking.

Rain pelts the window as I sit curled up in the library with my book, shivering. It may be summer, but it certainly doesn't feel like it. Not in this drafty castle with the wind and weather battering away at the walls outside. "You're not much help either." I scratch Whisper beneath her chin as she looks up from her spot on my lap. "A living cat would give off actual heat." Whisper sniffs, settling her head back down. Clearly my comfort is none of her concern. "I suppose I should just give in and bring this book back to the room where we can read in bed."

I scoop Whisper up onto my shoulder as I stand. "Let the staff think we're a couple of lazy lumps. Better than freezing to death in this ghastly place." It really is a drab room, with its high ceiling, dusty shelves, and outdated chairs with upholstery so faded I'm not sure what color they were originally. The large, unlit fireplace is the final straw, its empty maw mocking me as the room's chill creeps deeper into my bones. "Perhaps when I'm done with the garden, I should turn my attention to redecorating. That ought to keep me sufficiently busy."

Because the last thing I need is time on my hands. Time leads to thinking and thinking leads to worrying. And I promised myself I wouldn't linger on last night's events. Bertrand told me he'd be all right, and I've chosen to believe him. I will *not* second guess his word. No matter how many doubts attempt to break through my mental walls.

I snuggle Whisper close as I cross the room, eagerly anticipating the lush warmth of my bed, but a flutter of white off to the side catches my attention. I pause, scratching Whisper's head as I casually look over my shoulder.

And find I'm being watched.

A young woman wearing a dated pink dress with capped sleeves and an empire waist hovers in the corner of the room, red curls framing her freckled face. It's the first time I've ever noticed a ghost's complexion, but the dots are too prominent to be missed, even in the library's poor light. Whisper lets out a meow of greeting, and it's all the reassurance I need.

"Hello there." I take a step forward, hugging the gardening book against my waist. "My name is Adelaide. And you are…?"

The woman presses a hand to her mouth, eyes widening. "It's true. You *can* see us."

I glance around the room, back rigid as I look for others. "I can," I reply cautiously, unable to shake the feeling that the rest of the "us" she referred to is spying from the shadows. "Can I help you with something?"

"You have no idea," the woman breathes, floating forward in a rush of icy wind. I stumble backward, and she stops, chagrin coloring her pale face.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you. It's just, I can hardly believe you're here. We've waited so long."

"You've been waiting… for me?" I frown in confusion.

"Not you, per se, but someone like you," the woman explains. "Someone capable of helping us."

"And by *us* you mean…?"

"Bertrand's wives."

The words are clearly spoken, but I can't for the life of me make sense of them. Not with the sudden ringing in my ears and the overwhelming sense of dread weighing me down. "Bertrand's wives," I repeat numbly. He was a widower, yes. Marguerite said as much. Funny how I could forget such a singularly important detail.

I didn't want *to think about it. Didn't want to know anything about the woman who came before me.* But now that she's hovering before my very eyes, jealousy is the last thing on my mind. Because I'm almost certain she said—

"Wives. As in, more than one?" My tone is surprisingly calm. As if my world isn't crashing down around me.

The woman nods.

I swallow. "How many?"

"Six, including you. Seven if you count Celeste."

"Seven," I gasp. "But that's… that's impossible. He isn't old enough—"

"Appearances can be deceiving," the woman interrupts. She gives me a sad smile. "Especially when they belong to those who've ceased to age."

I shake my head. "Impossible. You—you're playing a trick on me. You didn't get the reaction you hoped for with all that wailing and moaning, so now you're making up lies to make me doubt my husband. Well, you needn't bother, because it won't work. I trust Bertrand. He would never do anything to hurt me."

"Maybe not." The woman's gaze grows steely as I creep toward the door. "But *she* will. You have to listen to me—"

A voice cuts through the ghost's pleas, startling me into dropping the book onto my foot. "There you are, Madame. I've been looking all over for you."

I turn with a grimace to find Louise framed in the doorway. She dips into a brief curtsy.

"I was just heading back to my room to read," I explain, pointedly ignoring the ghost glaring daggers at the young maid and stooping to pick up the heavy tome. "Did you need me for something?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." Louise's gaze darts about, touching everything aside from my own. "Ricard asked me to pass along a message from the master."

"Monsieur de Montragoux? Is he back from town already?" A bubble of surprised happiness spreads through my chest. He'd led me to believe he'd be gone all day.

Louise's answering smile is tremulous, her eyes still avoiding mine. "Yes, Madame. He just arrived and asked me to fetch you. It would seem he's prepared a bit of a surprise."

"Lies," the ghost hisses. "I would know if he were here, and he is not."

“How lovely,” I reply, my tone not quite resonating with the words. I don’t want to believe the apparition, but I can’t deny Louise seems rather off. Her complexion is paler than usual, and she won’t meet my eyes. I don’t like it. “I didn’t expect him nearly this soon.”

“I imagine he didn’t want to ruin the surprise.” She turns her back to me as she steps into the hall. “If you’ll follow me?”

“Don’t do it,” the ghost persists, her icy fingers latching onto my arm. “She’ll take you into the tower—take you to *her*.”

I can’t ask what she means, not without alarming Louise who seems oblivious to the ghost’s presence. But the mention of the tower is enough to stall my feet, doubt warring with curiosity as I stare at the maid’s waiting figure. The ghost’s grip relaxes at my hesitation, and there’s a note of relief in her voice as she whispers, “Make an excuse to leave and meet me in your room. I’ll gather the others. Listen to their stories, that’s all I ask.”

The others—the ghosts of Bertrand’s past wives, if this woman is to be believed. I shudder at the thought.

Louise casts a glance over her shoulder, brows lowered in consternation. “Madame? Are you coming?”

I meet the ghost’s eyes, nodding once. “I am.”

A relieved smile lights the specter’s face, and she nods back before disappearing through the floor. I turn my attention to Louise, who’s taken my words as confirmation that I’ll follow and has begun walking briskly ahead. I conjure an excuse to leave as I trail behind, but curiosity prevents me from making it. A part of me needs to know if the ghost was right about Louise taking me to the North Tower—the one place Bertrand gave me strict orders never to enter. My gut tells me she is, so I’m unsurprised when Louise stops in front of the forbidden door.

What I wasn’t counting on was the fact that Ricard would be waiting there, his bulldog-like face set in grim determination as he pulls a ring of keys from his pocket and inserts one into the door’s lock.

I take a step back, gaze locked on the key as it turns. “What’s going on?”

“The master has requested your presence, Madame.” Ricard opens the door to the creak of rusty hinges. The sound of a woman singing drifts down from the winding staircase, and the wavering notes prick my skin as the high pitch worms its way inside my head. It’s the sweetest torture.

Whisper's claws sink into my shoulder, and I startle to find I've taken a step toward the staircase without realizing. I swallow a lump of fear as I lift my chin, glaring down my nose at Ricard with an air of imperiousness.

"I think not. Monsieur de Montragoux gave me specific instructions not to enter the North Tower. I don't know what kind of trickery the two of you are up to, but mark my words—your master will hear about it."

Ricard's eyes gleam as he takes a step forward, grabbing my wrist with bruising force. "My master is waiting in the tower. You can tell her yourself."

"Tell *her*?" I struggle against his hold as he drags me toward the stairs. "What are you talking about?" Whisper disappears as I'm crowded inside the dark stairwell.

"You'll see," he grunts, herding me upward.

Louise's nervous voice floats up behind him. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Ricky? Monsieur isn't going to be happy that you went over his head."

"I stopped caring what Monsieur thinks when he stopped caring for the master's needs. He should have brought the girl here the moment he arrived. That's how it's always been done. Yet he's hidden her away for days, fornicating like animals. Tainting the master's things." He punctuates his growled words with a hard shove, and I stumble, falling to my hands and knees on the stone steps. "Up you go now, none of this stalling."

Like hell I will.

I jerk backward, slamming my back against Ricard and pinning him to the wall. As he grunts in surprise, I lunge forward, scrambling toward the door.

Only to come face-to-face with the tip of a terribly sharp-looking knife. Louise looks to be on the verge of tears as she holds the knife out, but her jaw is set. "We mustn't keep the master waiting," she states, waving me back up the stairs.

I stare at the extended blade, a small, cowardly part of me wondering if perhaps it wouldn't be better to throw myself on it right now and be done with it. Anything to escape this moment and the horror that surely awaits in the room above. Louise waves the knife again, and I turn, facing the unknown as dread overwhelms my senses.

We're going up.

22

ADELAIDE

Each step feels like a death march as the singing grows louder, twisting around my limbs like barbed wire. Ricard has taken possession of Louise's knife, and the tip prods my back any time my feet fail to move. The stairwell spirals higher and higher, and I fear my heart may break through the walls of my chest, it's pounding so hard. A light appears, glowing behind the curved stone wall, and Ricard gives me a sharp push as I freeze, legs locked in place.

I have no wish to see what waits at the top.

"C'mon, girlie, up we go."

My mouth is dry, fear burning my tongue, but I hold my head up high. "That's Madame de Montragoux to you, sir."

Ricard snorts. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"I don't take your meaning," I reply, stalling for time before I'm forced up the remaining steps. Forced to see what lurks behind the final curve.

"Not to worry," he chuckles, jabbing that wretched blade into my side. "You will." This time I feel the tip pierce my dress, feel the resulting dampness seep into the fabric. Oddly, the cut itself is the least offensive. I'm too numb to mind the pain.

When his knife fails to move me, Ricard mutters a curse before lifting me and hauling me up the last few steps. I squeeze my eyes shut. If I don't look, maybe it will go away. Perhaps I'll wake and find it's all been a dream.

The singing stops, and a voice sighs through the sudden silence. "*There* you are. Did my naughty Bertrand make you late?" They make a *tsk*ing sound. "I'm afraid the tea has grown cold, and bunny's eaten all the cake."

I crack one eye open.

And find another that gleams deep crimson in the candlelight, an overly-wide grin stretching out beneath it. "You may go now, Ricky."

"But mistress—"

"Leave us."

Now both of my eyes are open wide, darting between the creature looming before me and the chamber of death and torture that spills out around her. Blood stains the papered walls, and skeletons hang like gruesome artwork, their decaying shells dressed in bonnets and frilly dresses. A four-poster bed of twisted iron is spread with purple silk and piled with matching, gold-trimmed pillows. Off to the side, a table is laid out with a porcelain tea set, a mix of toy animals and cracked dolls seated in chairs around it. The creature—a woman in appearance, with a black veil covering her long white hair and a lacy black dress hugging her generous curves—frowns at the stuffed bunny, and I swallow a scream when I see its insides move.

A worm pokes out from behind a button eye, and my stomach roils.

The creature's gaze slides back toward mine. "Look at you. So lovely." Her head tilts as she studies me, and I have an overwhelming desire to dive beneath the bed and hide. "Is that why Bertrand didn't bring you sooner?" Her eyes narrow, sending a jolt of fear down my spine. "Is it true what Ricky said? Were you doing naughty things with my husband?"

My brain screams at me to run as she glides toward me, but I'm rooted to the spot.

Her voice drops to a husky whisper. "He should know better than to soil my new doll with his dirty hands." Gleaming white teeth flash between red-painted lips, and I stare in horror at the unnaturally long canines protruding from each side.

"You really are a lovely little doll, though," she purrs, fingertips grazing my chin and guiding my gaze upward. Her eyes are lit with a mesmerizing glow, and I sway as a wave of euphoria washes over me. *My mistress thinks I'm lovely.*

"So different from the others. Not at all what I usually prefer."

A sob works its way up my chest. *I can change. Whatever it takes. Just please don't despise me.*

"Special, perhaps."

My heart bursts with joy.

She brushes the hair off my shoulder, and I tremble beneath her touch. A desperate yearning tugs at my core as she leans in, her breath slipping over my skin like melting ice. I tip my head back as her lips caress my neck, an inexplicable excitement coursing through me. When she pulls back, I can't help a whimper of disappointment.

"Hush now. None of that," she admonishes. "I am going to taste you, but we mustn't make it too obvious or it'll spoil the fun." She lifts my hair, tucking my head forward as her mouth latches onto the base of my skull. A flicker of pain, a tightening of my chest, and then…

Bliss.

Pure, utter bliss.

Her tongue glides over the back of my neck before she looses my hair, letting it fall back into place as I lift my head. "There now," she coos. "That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

I can hardly catch my breath long enough to answer. "Yes, mistress."

A benevolent smile graces her lips. "This is to be our little secret, do you understand? You're not to let Bertrand know you've seen me, or the game will be over and you'll be sent straight to bed without cake."

Bertrand. Who's Bertrand? I struggle to conjure a face to match the name, but my head is a muddied fog of pleasure. Still, my mistress is waiting for a response, so I dutifully nod. "Not a word."

She pats my face. "That's a good girl. Normally I wouldn't keep secrets from him, but he's been terribly naughty, ruining my new doll. He collects them for me, you know. Blushing brides, all sweet and innocent. Not like you." She wrinkles her nose. "You're not innocent at all." Her nail digs into my cheek, scratching its way down the soft flesh. "You're a wicked, rotten little thing, aren't you?"

Her words carve a hole in my chest, every part of me aching to please this magnificent creature. Fearing that I never will.

Her hand falls away, leaving me desolate as she glides toward the arched window. "Let him play with his pilfered toy a bit longer. Let him think he's gotten what he wants." The ghost of a smile graces her angelic

face as she peers through the plated glass. “It’ll make his despair all the sweeter when he sees you break.”

Act Three

In which Bertrand begins to panic.

23

BERTRAND

This is going to work. It has to work. The woman sitting across from me in the carriage with her hands neatly folded in her lap and dingy carpet bag unraveling at her feet is the answer, I'm certain of it. A young woman of no consequence, with no bothersome relatives to wonder what has become of her. Quiet and meek, with a mildly pleasant face and innocent eyes—she checks all the boxes on Celeste's list. The preferred qualities I'm to seek out in each new bride. Ones I neglected when choosing Adelaide.

Adelaide.

God, I miss her even now, with less than a day lost between us. She haunted my thoughts with each interview, tempting me to choose the first potential maid and be done with it. Sticking it out until I found this one—the right one—was positively grueling. It'll be worth it, though, once she meets her new mistress, and I can finally relax knowing Adelaide is safe.

It's a strange feeling, this indulgence I've allowed myself. Both blissfully freeing and suffocating all at once. After a century serving as Celeste's whipping boy, doing something for my own pleasure feels deliciously empowering. And there's something about Adelaide, something intangible, that makes every effort, every strange new feeling, worthwhile. She's beautiful, yes, but I've met countless beauties in my lifetime, and none of them ever tempted me to act against Celeste's wishes.

No, it's not her porcelain features and raven locks that make her so precious, lovely as they are. It's something else. Something in the way she

smiles, the way her laugh seems to fill the myriad cracks marring my soul. It's in the softness of her voice when she spoke with Sister Mercy. There hadn't been a trace of fear or condemnation, despite the fact that she was speaking to a ghost who'd brazenly admitted to murder. She'd understood Sister Mercy's actions. Praised them, even.

It gives me hope that I, too, might one day be redeemed, impossible though it seems.

But that same hope strangles me in the night as it warps into fear. What if I've gone too far? What if Celeste doesn't accept my offering? If she cuts me off, the beast will eventually overpower my will, and there will be far more lost than a few meek maids and innocent brides.

The carriage rolls to a stop at the base of the steps leading up to the castle, and I give the new maid—what was her name again—a terse smile. "Here we are—Château de Montragoux. I hope you're prepared to meet your new mistress right away. She's most anxious to make your acquaintance."

"Yes, sir," the woman replies. "I'm quite ready."

There's a determined tilt to her chin that makes me pause as guilt trickles through my veins. She has no idea what she's in for, the tragic twist of fate awaiting her at Celeste's hands. *If there was another way…*

But there is not, so I climb out of the carriage, not bothering to look back at the woman as Griffon helps her down—reminding myself she's expendable. A trifle to appease the monster lurking in the tower, one whose fate will save countless others. The only woman in this wretched world who truly matters is Adelaide.

Speak of the angel.

If I still had a heart, it would be tripping over itself at the sight of my beautiful bride, hair loose and whipping in the wind as she stands at the top of the steps, a glorious smile stretched across her face. She waves down at us as we approach, and it's like I'm walking on air.

"Bertrand, you're back!" Adelaide's voice is brimming with excitement as I jog the last few steps standing between us. She lets out a delightful squeal as I scoop her up, lifting her into my arms and placing a kiss on those delectable lips. She cards her fingers through my hair, pulling me down for another. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, darling," I murmur, reluctantly setting her back on her feet. I drink in the sight of her, all tousled hair and flushed cheeks from

the wind—but what's this? An angry red slash mars the left side of her face, and I can barely contain my growl as I trace the raised line with my thumb. "Who did this to you?"

Adelaide turns into my hand, placing a kiss against my palm. "An incredibly impertinent bramble in the garden. I demand you cut it down at once."

My anger melts in the face of her light, and I let out a relieved chuckle. "Consider it done."

"And your business in town?" she asks. "Is that done as well?"

"Almost. I have just to situate the new maid, and then I'll be all yours."

Her gaze flicks over my shoulder, eyes gleaming with curiosity. "A new maid?"

"Yes. To assist Louise now that the household is expanding." I feel a stab of regret that I wasn't able to ferry the young woman up to the tower without Adelaide noticing. This greeting, delightful though it may be, has made everything a bit more complicated.

"How lovely." Adelaide steps around me as she addresses the young woman waiting an appropriate distance behind. "I'm Madame de Montragoux, mistress of the château. If you have any trouble, please feel free to come to me with your concerns."

God, she's kind. Kind and considerate and gentle. My precious Adelaide. I lift her hand, kissing her knuckles as I move behind her. Breathing her in.

The maid curtsies. "Thank you, ma'am."

Adelaide leans back against my chest, and I slip my arms around her waist. The impropriety of our pose is scandalous. Embracing my wife as she addresses the staff? Unheard of.

I love it.

"Of course," Adelaide replies. "Now, if you'll excuse us, my husband and I have some pressing business to attend to. I'm sure Edgar can show you to your room."

Her backside rubs against my groin as she says this, making rational thought excruciatingly difficult. Bloody hell, I hadn't even noticed Edgar's approach, but there he is. Waiting for his orders. I could send the maid up with him. He'd know where to take her. And Adelaide feels so soft and inviting beneath my hands. I'm half-tempted to lift her skirts and enter her right here, Edgar and the sacrificial maid be damned.

No. Celeste will be offended if you send Edgar to do your dirty work. Adelaide can wait. It's for her that you have to do this, after all. Sighing, I place a chaste kiss on Adelaide's hair before releasing my hold on her waist and taking a step back. "I'm afraid there are some particulars regarding Miss…" Drat, I forgot that I'd forgotten the maid's name.

She speaks up, filling in the blank. "Emily. Emily Garnier."

"Yes, of course. Miss Garnier." I clear my throat, an edge of panic creeping up my spine. What am I even doing? "There are some particulars regarding her work here that I'll need to see to personally. It shouldn't take long," I add, seeing the moue on Adelaide's face. "And I'll return to you as soon as I'm free."

Adelaide's lip sticks out in an adorable pout. "Promise?"

God, I love this woman. "I swear on my life, I will rush to your side the first chance I get. The staff will think I've gone mad I'll run so fast."

"And they'll be right," Adelaide says, running a coy hand down my chest. "You must be mad if you're willing to make me wait after I've already been waiting all day." She stretches up on her tiptoes, her lips brushing my ear as she whispers, "Don't think it won't cost you." Teeth nip my earlobe, and I swallow a moan. "I hope you're prepared to be punished," she adds, and this time I can't smother the growl that builds in my throat. Satisfied with my response, she leaves, sashaying up to the castle.

I take a fortifying breath before sparing the maid a brief glance. She's watching me with wide eyes, her cheeks decidedly red. "Right this way, Miss Garnier." I beckon for her to follow, my gaze swinging back to Adelaide's retreating figure. "Your room will be in the North Tower."

She trails behind me like a proper little duckling, not uttering a single peep as I lead her through the dimly lit castle. If she's nervous, she keeps it well hidden, with only the faintest hint of tension lining her face when I stop in front of the tower door and retrieve the ancient key from my jacket pocket. The incessant wailing of my late wives drifts through the door, but she shows no sign of hearing them.

Good. It will be easier for her that way.

She hesitates at the foot of the stairs, however, her expression uncertain as she looks up at me. "My room is… up there?"

"In the North Tower, yes. As I said."

She nods, and yet her feet remain rooted in place. Perhaps she's not as biddable as I thought. "The rooms on this floor, they are the servants' quarters, are they not? I'd hate for you to waste a grand room on a lowly maid such as myself. I'd be perfectly content down here."

"Ah, but there is work to be done in the tower." I take a step closer, allowing my formidable stature to crowd her into the stairwell. "It's why I hired you in the first place."

She licks her lips, eyes darting about nervously. "Maid work in the tower? Where I'll also be sleeping?" Her hands ball into fists as she lifts her chin, a determined grimace creasing her face. "I will not be taking any work on my back, if you catch my meaning, sir. I'm a respectable woman."

Ah, so that's what is worrying her. I take a step back, allowing her a bit of space. "I promise you, Miss Garnier, I have no intention of laying even a single finger on your person."

She holds my gaze for a long moment, seemingly assessing the truthfulness of that statement. I must convince her, as she nods and makes her way up the spiraling tower. Making her way to Celeste. I have a sudden urge to call out, to tell her to run, but I clamp my lips shut.

I shouldn't care what happens to this woman. She'll be happy enough under Celeste's thrall. Happier than she likely would have been given her current lot in life. Never again will she feel the sting of pain or the ache of hunger. Never weep from the loss of a loved one. It's a blessing, really, the bliss that Celeste grants them.

Or so I tell myself.

Celeste's gaze is on me the moment I step into the room, white hair spilling down her bare back as she stands by the window. I avert my eyes, picking a spot on the wall free of carnage to focus on. She's naked aside from the dark purple shawl draped loosely around her body, covering only her most private bits. She wants me to look at her, to worship at her feet, but I have no desire to play her games. Not with Adelaide waiting for me downstairs.

The tethers that bind my will to hers tighten, and I find my head turning in spite of myself. Celeste's less than subtle reminder of who's in control. "The prodigal husband returns," she drawls once she's ensured my full attention. "And he's brought a gift. How very… quaint."

"A gift carefully selected to suit your preferences." I gesture toward the new maid, who looks to be a breath away from screaming. The moment it

slips from her mouth, however, it silences, and the young woman's eyes grow dreamy as she stares into space.

"You were supposed to bring me a shiny new doll," Celeste says, looking Miss Garnier over. "A bride for your bride." She looks up from beneath fluttering lashes, allowing her shawl to slip over one shoulder as she pouts. "Do you no longer wish to please me?"

If only she knew how frequently I dream of wrapping my hands around her neck and squeezing. Watching the life flicker from her eyes. It would be as glorious as it is impossible.

"That's just it," I explain, infusing my voice with honey. "I do. This new bride, she only married me to save her family from debt. She pretended to be sweet and innocent, but it was all a lie. A show put on to entrap me. Too late I discovered what a lewd, vile creature she truly was." I hang my head with feigned shame. "I made a mistake, my love, and I can't see a way out of it. I'd send her back to her family if I weren't afraid of raising questions. But as long as you're satisfied with Miss Garnier here, I will do my utmost to bear the dragon's presence below. Assuming, of course, I'm not too thirsty…"

I pose the last bit as a question, raising an eyebrow as I wait for judgment to be dispensed. Will she accept this flimsy excuse? Or will she insist on seeing Adelaide for herself? If it's the latter, I'm not entirely sure what I'll do.

My throat is painfully dry.

Celeste sways toward me, and I try not to cringe as she lets the shawl drop to the floor before pressing herself against me. I avoid her gaze, desperate to stay free of her thrall as visions claw at my brain, dark memories I've spent years burying beneath a facade of indifference.

"Such great lengths my Bertrand has gone to make me happy," Celeste murmurs.

"I would go to any length you asked. Just say the word." Any length to obtain that wretched tonic, that rich blue nectar of life that runs through her veins. It's so close, I can almost taste it.

"Such a sweet boy." She runs a hand down my cheek before gripping the beard she insists I keep—her personal statement upon my person. What I wouldn't give to shave the damn thing off once and for all. "He'll have his taste."

My teeth pierce my lower lip in their eagerness. “And my flask? You’ll refill it?”

She drifts away with a disapproving tut. “Greedy boy.” She glances pointedly at Miss Garnier. “You know you can’t have your cake until I’ve served the tea. It’s bad manners."

Which means I’ll have to come back tomorrow and hope for more. I grit my teeth as I force a grin. “You’re right, of course, darling,” I croon, stepping forward to take her hand. Salivating as I turn it over and eye the sapphire lines visible beneath the pale flesh of her wrist. “Just a taste then.”

She draws it away before my fangs can scratch the surface, her smirk irritatingly smug as she pushes me back and extends a pointed toe. “Naughty boys must beg for their scraps,” she purrs.

Anger and humiliation war inside my chest, but the thirst overtakes them both. I drop to the floor like the lowly dog that I am, and drink from my mistress’s feet.

24

BERTRAND

As much as I loathe the creature who holds the tattered shreds of my humanity in her hands, I can't deny the way her blood invigorates me.

As sunlight creeps into the room through a gap in the heavy, red drapes, I wake feeling more alive than I have in weeks. The stale swill I've been limping by on is nothing compared to the elixir pumping through my veins, so fresh from the source.

Speaking of which…

A rush of said elixir heads due south as I recall the way Adelaide pounced on me upon my return last night. Her passion rivaled mine, even with the lustful high that drinking Celeste's blood always prompted. She was aggressive and forceful in ways I'd never seen from her.

It was glorious.

Grinning, I roll onto my side with the intention of waking my insatiable wife in her favorite way—one involving my tongue and the honey-sweet center between her legs—only to find her half of the bed empty.

She's gone. She realized what you were and fled. She was taken to the tower. She—

Panic swells, choking me with a multitude of scenarios, each one worse than the next, until rational thought forces its way through the clamor.

She probably just made an early start of it in the garden. The thought soothes the tension building in my chest, allowing me to breathe. *Yes, that must be it. The garden.*

Deep breath in, slowly out.

She's fine. I'm fine. Everything is going to be perfectly fine. The plan is working.

Stretching out of bed, I make my way into the toilettes to freshen up. A glance in the mirror assures me Celeste's blood is working its magic. Gone are the dark circles around my eyes and the pallid complexion, replaced with a healthy glow. My smile dips, however, as my gaze falls to my beard. If only I had the nerve to shave it off.

Or do I?

My heart thuds as I reach for the razor. *You can do it. Shave the whole mess off. Leave the stigma of the blue beard behind and start fresh with Adelaide at your side.* My fingers linger over the handle before picking up the trimming shears instead. A fanciful notion, one I could never follow through on. My life is tethered to Celeste's existence. Without her blood, I'd be nothing more than a feral animal. Immortal, yes. But mindless. Driven by the relentless desire to feed. There'd be no Adelaide at my side in that life. If she stayed long enough, she'd only become fodder for the monster to feed upon.

I can't shave it off, but a trim should be safe. I clip the hairs as short as I dare and inspect the results. *It'll have to do.* Now, to find my bride.

My feet feel light as air as I jog down the stairway and out the front door, shouting a "good morning" to Edgar as I pass him skulking about the foyer. Waiting, always waiting. For what, I have yet to figure out. It's not as though we ever have visitors. Or perhaps he's waiting for the same thing Ricard and Louise and Griffon and Cook are all waiting for as they tie their days to this desolate place. Serving a mistress who hasn't left her room in almost a century. They're all waiting for the very thing I had thrust upon me, so many years ago. Waiting for a chance at eternity. I haven't the heart to tell them they're wasting their time. No. That's a lie. Truth is, I simply don't care what becomes of them. They've made their choice.

Adelaide, on the other hand…

I quicken my pace through the morning fog, pulse kicking up as I approach the garden. Anticipation pulls at my lips, curving them into a hungry smile as I prowl through the gateway. "Thought you could run off without a kiss goodbye did you, you naughty minx?"

My words fall on empty walls.

She's not here.

The panic returns, and I struggle to think clearly, to hear that rational voice again. *If she's not in the garden, where else would she have gone so early? Looking for new books in the library?* I suppose it's possible, though my gut says otherwise. Fear sends my hand flying to my jacket pocket, feeling for the brass key tucked inside.

Still there.

I sigh with relief. I don't think Adelaide would defy my warning and go into the tower herself, but then again, she did go swimming in that damnable lake. I can't completely trust her judgment. *The servants have strict instructions not to take her into the tower without me, so I doubt any of them would lure her up there without a direct order from Celeste. I'm the one who pays their wages, after all. And Celeste wouldn't have summoned her. She has Miss Garnier.*

Yes, that's right. The sacrificial lamb. I wonder briefly how Adelaide would feel if she knew I'd sent an innocent young woman off to her slow, albeit blissful, death. Would she understand? Or would she run screaming the other way?

I trudge back inside and make my way up to the library, my steps growing heavy under the weight of my thoughts. I need to see her, to draw her into my arms and lose myself in her kisses. Then and only then will I be able to regain my previous euphoria.

Only she isn't in the library.

My stomach is a lead ball. *Not the tower. Anywhere but the tower.* I sprint down the hall, gaining speed with each corner I round. Up another flight of stairs, down another corridor. Denial gives me wings. But then, as I race down the final stretch, a flash of white catches my eye through the window. A closer look, and my breath puffs out in a relieved laugh. Adelaide isn't in the tower. She's merely enjoying the ocean view from the westward-facing bluff.

My paranoia has gotten the better of me.

I take my time winding back down through the castle, determined not to arrive looking like a madman and smelling like a sweaty pig. I fix my collar, smooth my hair. I save my smile for the moment she's finally within reach, standing on the rocky bluff as her skirts whip about her ankles.

"There you are." My smile grows wider as her sparkling eyes meet mine. "I've been looking all over for you, only to find you standing in plain view. Do you see what a lovestruck fool you've made of me?"

“We’re all fools in one way or another,” she teases. She lifts a hand to brush her windblown hair free of her face, but I capture it before she can, raining a trail of kisses from her wrist all the way up to her elbow. Only the stiff, white fabric of her sleeve stops me, and even that provides nothing more than a pause as I pull her against my chest and claim her lips.

She sighs into my embrace, and I am renewed.

When at last we reluctantly part, I take my time tracing her cheekbone with my thumb. “I thought we could go into town today,” I murmur. “Pick out whatever supplies you think you’ll need for the garden.”

“Mm.” She turns her head, looking out over the water. White-tipped waves break on the rocky cliffside, casting misty sprays into the air. “I’m not particularly interested in gardening anymore.”

I raise a brow in surprise. I wouldn’t have pegged her as the fickle type. Then again, last night should have been proof enough that there’s more to this woman than can be gleaned in a few scant weeks. “What does interest you, then?” I ask, skimming my fingers through her hair.

She catches my hand before I can cup the back of her head and turn her lips toward mine. Her face takes on a dreamy expression. “Flying.”

Flying? My hands fall to my sides as she steps away, befuddlement making a mess of my senses. *What could she possibly mean by tha—*

My heart stops as she raises her arms and leaps from the edge of the cliff.

25

BERTRAND

This isn't happening. This isn't—

I die a million, agonizing deaths as I stare into the churning water below. *Where* is *she?*

Not a single hair on Adelaide's raven head is visible within the treacherous waves as I clamber barefoot down the side of the cliff. There are so many rocks, so many jagged edges poised to tear her soft flesh and crush her skull. *She didn't hit them. There'd be blood if she hit them. You'd smell it.* Unless the blood is underwater, spreading crimson streaks as my wife sinks to the bottom of the sea.

I dive into the frigid brine, grateful for the first time that Celeste stole my need to breathe. The current tries to throw me against the bluff, but I fight it with each powerful stroke. A tang of copper and strawberries slithers through the dark water, and I follow it, tracing its source. Rocks scrape my knees and my palms slip through weeds and muck as the trail leads me ashore. My head breaks the surface, and there she is—Adelaide, safe on solid ground.

Safe and *smiling*.

My fists strike the pebbled beach as I drag myself from the sea, dripping salt and seeing red. "What the hell was that?"

"What? I wanted to have a little fun." She tilts her head as she wraps long fingers around her dripping hair and twists, wringing out the excess water. Blood trickles from an abrasion on her forearm, but her expression is playful as she gazes up at me.

“Horseback riding is fun,” I seethe. “Sex is fun. Diving off a cliff into rocky water is a death wish.”

Her eyes narrow at my tone. “It was a lark.”

“A *lark?*” I wave my hand at the blood staining her soaked sleeves. “You think hurting yourself is a good time?”

She shrugs. “You’re hardly one to talk. Or are you going to deny what happened the other night when I found you half-dead in the tub?”

“That was different.”

“Was it?” She stands, arching an eyebrow as she pads toward me. “You never did say what happened, so why don’t you tell me now?” The aroma of blood saturates the air as she stops a breath away, her injured arm lifting perilously close to my face as she cups my cheek. Like the finest wine, it begs to be tasted, and I can feel my fangs extending in spite of myself. Adelaide’s eyes flash, her gaze dropping to my mouth. “Or perhaps instead of talking, you could simply help me clean this mess up. There are bandages in the room…” Her voice drops to a husky whisper. “Or you could lick it clean right here.”

God help me, I want to, but something about this feels wrong. And I don’t want to hurt her. Anyone but her. “You don’t know what you’re saying,” I rasp, clutching the swell of her hips to keep from grabbing her arm and sinking my teeth into the primed flesh. *I don’t need it. The monster is sated.*

She nibbles her lower lip as she holds my gaze, driving the lingering anger away as her hand drops to her chest, fingers grazing her ruined décolletage. Drawing my attention to the way the translucent fabric clings to her curves.

Perhaps I’m being paranoid, and it really *was* only a bit of fun. Wasn’t her adventurous spirit one of the attributes that drew me to her in the first place?

My fingers sink into her softness, pulling her flush against me as I rock my hips. Her answering gasp is all I need. I scoop her into my arms and carry her back toward the castle, a growl rumbling up my chest as her hands clutch my hair.

Edgar’s eyes are wide as saucers as we pass through the foyer, dripping muddy water across the stone floor. They’ll be even wider once I get her in the room, and the echo of her screams fills the empty halls. Even the ghosts will blush at the sound.

I carry her straight to the toilettes and set her down beside the large, claw-foot tub. “You’ve ruined your dress,” I murmur, keeping my voice cool as she blinks up at me with innocent eyes. As if she doesn’t know exactly what she’s doing. “Take it off.”

Her lips curve, the faintest hint of a smirk dancing across them. “My hands are too cold to work the buttons.” She turns her back to me, and peeks over her shoulder. “You do it.”

I run my hand along her upper back, just above the line of her dress, and she shivers. Grinning, I dip my fingers beneath the row of pearl-shaped buttons and yank, hard. Bits and bobs careen across the floor. “There. Worked the buttons.”

“I’d say.” She starts to laugh, but it turns to a gasp as I slide my hands under the gaping fabric and cup her breasts. I roll the stiff peaks beneath my fingertips, and she leans back, resting her head against my shoulder.

“Warming up?” I ask, tracing her arousal as my mouth ghosts the line of her neck. Fangs brushing skin. Scratching—never breaking. Tasting, but never draining. Control. I have to maintain control. She moans an affirmation, and it’s all I can do not to give in. To sink my teeth into her flesh and feast upon the angel in my arms. It’d be so easy.

I rear my head back with a snarl and rip the gown off completely, scraps of sodden fabric falling in clumps at our feet. She’s bare underneath, her glistening skin a decadent display of pink and creamy white that begs to be consumed. I clench my hands into fists, frozen in place as I stare helplessly at the woman before me. Just the thought of her blood on my tongue is enough to drive me wild, but stronger still is the fear of hurting her. Of taking too much. Of finally scaring her away.

I can’t risk losing her.

As I stand there, desperate and immobile, Adelaide lets out a mew of longing. She shifts her hips from side to side, pressing her backside against my groin. “Bertrand, *please.*”

Two simple words, and my fear melts away. There’s no way on earth I’ll allow this precious creature to be hurt. Not by me or Celeste or anyone else. I will destroy them all before I allow that to happen.

Myself included.

“Such fine manners,” I murmur, grasping her hip as my other hand slides between her legs. I dip a finger inside her warmth and grin. “And so very wet.” I add a second finger, stretching the tight space as she whimpers.

“Please, Bertrand. I need you.”

You have it backwards. I’m the one whose existence hangs on your every breath. “Place your hands on the side of the tub. Just like that, good girl.” I shove my ocean-soaked pants to the floor and clasp either side of her perfect ass, spreading her wide before I slip inside. It starts slow and tender, but quickly builds, fueled by the desperate roar building in my chest.

Mine.

Her moans echo my intensity, and the gleam in her eyes as she looks over her shoulder shakes me to my core. It reminds of the simple truth—she may be mine for now, but I will be hers long after her life expires. This woman will haunt me for eternity, and I am helpless to do anything except welcome the sentence with open arms.

26

BERTRAND

We spend the rest of the day in bed. Well, not strictly in bed per se. We also linger in the bath, washing each other with meticulous attention to detail; lounge on the chaise, with Adelaide's legs draped over my shoulders; and brace against the window sill, looking out at the ocean as our own waves crest over and over again. I embrace the power of Celeste's blood as it works its way through my system, enjoying every last ounce before it recedes. Which, inevitably, it does, leaving me staring at the ceiling in the dark, sheets clenched in my fists, as Adelaide's soft snores roll over me. Soothing, but not soothing enough for the monster clawing its way free of my chest.

I need another dose.

Creeping out of bed, I wince as the floorboards creak under my feet and again when I open the door, the wails of my past wives flooding the room. I slip into the hall on a prayer, clicking the door shut behind me. I can't have Adelaide waking. Can't risk her following me into the demon's layer.

The key weighs heavy in my hand as I unlock the tower door, even more so than usual. I hate that I have to crawl back to her so soon, scraping and begging for scraps. I've grown accustomed to my flask, to the cask filled each month and tucked away in the kitchen stores. The facade of independence it grants me.

It shatters like cheap glass the moment I step through the door, and five pairs of eyes appear to greet me, glaring accusations as I move past them.

You brought us here.

You courted us, filled our heads with foolish dreams. But the moment the ink dried, you abandoned us here—payment for your comfort.

You think she's the villain, but you're wrong.

It's you, Bertrand de Montragoux.

"Do you hear that, little bear? Someone's coming to play with us." Celeste's silky voice interrupts my dark thoughts, and my limbs grow sluggish as her gaze locks with mine from where she lays in bed, a tattered bear cradled against her chest. What little of her blood remains trickling through my veins pulses, growing hot beneath my skin. Drawing me under her thrall. I know it's happening, *hate* that it's happening, but resistance will only make her angry.

And that's the last thing I need right now.

"My darling"—the words are like ash on my tongue, bitter and dry —"you're looking absolutely radiant tonight. I hope that means Miss Garnier is proving a worthy source." I can't tear my gaze away from Celeste's, not fully, but there's a hint of movement on the edge of my periphery that I assume is the young maid I brought up earlier.

Celeste simpers at the compliment, and she nuzzles the stuffed bear's cheek before fluttering her fingers off to the side, allowing me to turn my head enough to see the poor girl, shoulders curved as she sits at the eternal tea party, a silver needle flashing in her hand as she meticulously stitches the flesh of her forearm together. Blood seeps from a gaping cut that runs from her elbow to her wrist, dripping onto the tabletop with the measured rhythm of a clock ticking the seconds away.

"She stole the last piece of cake," Celeste explains in sing-song. "Bear was quite put out."

This… this is my fault. I might as well plunge the needle through the girl's flesh myself.

At least she looks happy.

"I'm sure they'll work things out," I murmur, unable to tear my gaze from that industrious needle. Each pull of the thread adds to the sickening feeling inside my gut, and all I can see is Adelaide covered in blood. Mutilating herself with a smile and a song. My hands shake as I reach into my pocket and pull out my flask. "While I'm here…"

Celeste frowns, turning once again to the stuffed bear. "He's not here to play, is he? All he wants is our blood."

I try to look properly chastised. "If it pleases you."

“If it pleases me.” Celeste’s eyes narrow. She covers the bear’s ears. “You come here smelling like *her*, and think that will please me?” Her voice drops to a whisper. “She’s defiled you.”

Damn. I thought that last bath would be enough. I should’ve known better than to bring Adelaide in with me. Although, to be honest, I can’t truly regret it. Not with the memory of those perfect breasts floating above the suds so fresh in my mind. “My apologies. It won’t happen again.”

“Such a naughty husband,” she sighs. “What am I going to do with you?” She lifts the stuffed bear so that its embroidered mouth is flush against her ear, a grin creeping over her face as she pretends to listen. “What a clever bear,” she giggles. “Yes, that’s just what we’ll do.” She pins me with a hard look, any hint of laughter gone. “Two days without feeding. Effective immediately.”

Two days without feeding? She can’t be serious. I’m already on edge. How am I to temper the monster for another two days without her blood? “Celeste, please. Surely there’s something else I could do to make up for my transgressions.” My stomach turns as I force myself to step forward and stroke the bare ankle peeking out from the tangled bedding.

Anything.

I’ll do anything to keep Adelaide safe.

She smirks as if she knows exactly how much I hate it. Hate her. Knowing it doesn’t matter—I’ll be her slave until the end of time. Either that or let the monster free.

There’s another way. You’ve just been too cowardly to go through with it.

My heart races at the thought. I *was* afraid, but now I can almost accept it. Except…

Adelaide.

I’m not ready to let her go.

A snarl interrupts my musings, and my body locks in place as Celeste crawls to the foot of the bed and fists my shirt. “I know that look,” she hisses. “You’re thinking of her, aren’t you?” Anger burns in her eyes as she shrieks, “You naughty, naughty boy.”

She releases me with a shove, and I stumble backward, cold sweat slicking my skin. I shake my head, and her lip juts out in a pout as she points toward the stairs.

"*Three* days without blood, and if I catch even a whiff of you near my door it'll be longer."

Three days. I've never gone three days. I *can't* go three days. "But, Celeste—"

"Feast on that new bride you're so enamored with." She bares her teeth in a snarl. "You could drain every last drop, but her blood will never satisfy you the way mine does. Now go. Get out of my sight!"

I turn on numb legs and do as she says. Just as I have every day for the past century with one notable exception—the day I married Adelaide. The best and worst day of my existence.

She's still asleep when I slip into the room, the sheets wrapped around her legs. *She snores* and *tosses in her sleep.* I perch on the edge of the bed, watching her chest rise and fall. *She's perfect in every way, my Adelaide.* My gaze lifts to the smooth column of her neck, gleaming white amid a backdrop of wavy black curls, and I run my tongue over my teeth as I picture them sinking in. A small taste, nothing she would miss. It wouldn't even hurt. Tempting, so very tempting. I bend down, breathing her in. Her eyes flutter open, and I rear back, shame stinging my cheeks beneath her dreamy gaze.

She sighs, soft and sweet. "Oh Bertrand," she murmurs, eyes closing as she snuggles deeper into her pillow. "I can sleep so soundly knowing you're here, watching over me."

I'm the fucking devil.

Guilt sends me stumbling to the toilettes, where I rip my shirt off with a growl of self-loathing before collapsing into the empty bath. All these years, my only tether to humanity has been my refusal to feed off the humans around me, and yet here I am, considering doing just that to the woman I claim to love.

I don't even try to be careful as I bite down on my arm, tearing the flesh as I feed. It's a wretched, miserable thing, like drinking your own piss to stave off dehydration. The watered-down blood burns my throat with every sip, but I welcome the pain.

It's more than I deserve.

27

BERTRAND

I wake in the bath, alone this time. While I'm relieved to spare Adelaide the gruesome sight, a small, selfish part of me wishes she were here, tenderly wrapping the weeping skin.

God, I'm pathetic.

Dragging myself out of the tub, I cringe at the dull throbbing in my throat, the tightness in my chest. Drinking my own blood may have quelled me last night, but it's a flimsy fix. I need Celeste's blood. Three days. What am I going to do for three days? I push the worry from my mind as I wrap gauze around my bloodied arm. It'll heal soon enough, and for the moment, I'm me. I plan to spend every moment I can with my wife. I creep into the room, heading straight for the bed. Which is empty. Again.

Bloody hell.

All I can think of is Adelaide turning to me with a smile right before she jumped off that damnable cliff. Flying, she said. Fuck.

There's no time for shoes or a shirt as I sprint from the room, tear through the halls, and trip down the stairs. Every wasted moment is one in which Adelaide could be sucking in seawater or bleeding out along the surf. I have to be there, have to save her. There's no sign of her on the bluff, but that does little to assuage my fears. It only means I'm late, that she's already jumped. I'm sure of it.

The water is unusually still when I reach the edge, tiny waves lapping calmly against the rock. No blood in the air, no bodies bobbing out to sea. Still, I'm poised to jump when Ricard's voice startles me from behind.

“Monsieur? What on earth are you doing?”

“Adelaide,” I rasp, too panicked to form full sentences.

“I see,” Ricard replies, although the dubious tone of his voice suggests otherwise. “Well, if you’re looking for Madame de Montragoux, you’d have better luck in the garden. She was elbow-deep in pruning last I saw her.”

Pruning. In the garden.

I’m an idiot.

Laughter bubbles up in my chest, and I bend over, hands braced against my knees as I let it out in a relieved burst. Ricard’s eyebrows lose themselves in his hairline, his eyes wide as he stares at me in obvious shock. I don’t blame him. I’m rarely seen without a perfectly pressed suit and tie, and here I am now—half naked and cackling like a deranged loon.

I couldn’t care less. Adelaide is in the garden.

“Thank you, Ricard. That’ll be all.” I wave without looking back as I jog around the side of the castle toward the rear garden, relief making everything brighter. I’m a breath away from breaking into song when I reach the garden gate and pause, leaning against the wall as I watch Adelaide work. Her back is to me, and she has on that ridiculously large straw hat of hers, as well as a pair of gloves. I wonder briefly where she managed to scrounge them up, along with the pruning shears, which look rather worse for wear. Rusty and dull. I vow to find her better equipment the moment I’ve fed again.

“You missed a spot,” I whisper, sneaking up behind her and kissing her neck. She lets out a startled squeal, and I grin against her warm skin, wrapping my arms around her waist as I pull her close.

“Bertrand,” she admonishes, twisting around to glare at me with mock sternness. “You scared me.”

“Payback,” I murmur, stealing a kiss. “For leaving me this morning.”

“Leaving *you*?” The corners of her eyes crinkle in confusion. “I was the one who woke to an empty bed, I’ll have you know.”

Oh. Right. “I must have been in the toilettes, washing up. I’m surprised you didn’t see me.”

Her lips purse with amusement as her gaze flicks down to my bare chest and feet. “Well. I’m certainly seeing you now.” Her hands brush my shoulders before drifting south, teasing their way down before resting on my hips. Her thumbs hook inside my waistband, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

I'm butter on a hot day.

Adelaide presses a series of kisses along my collarbone before turning and picking up her discarded shears. I immediately steal them away, causing her to huff. "Just tell me what you want trimmed, and leave this relic to me. I promise to get you a superior replacement soon."

"I was managing it just fine," Adelaide points out, grinning playfully. "But if you insist, then I suppose I can humor you."

"That's all I ask." I bump my hips against her rear as I peer over her shoulder, pretending to examine the unruly bush. "Now, where would you like me to stick my tool?"

Her snort-laugh fills me with sunshine, and I'm certain my grin is more than a little foolish as she responds with a wiggle of her own. She stretches out her hand, pointing to a particularly tangled mass of brambles. "Here, I think—oh!" She yanks her hand back, blood beading on the tip of her finger. "Clumsy me."

The monster rears its head.

"I have to…" Saliva floods my mouth as her scent permeates the air. The shears clatter against the paving stones as I press a hand over my face. "I have to go. A meeting, I'm late." Nonsense. I'm sputtering gibberish, but it's all I can manage as the blood lust claws its way up my throat. I need to get out of here.

"Bertrand?" Her voice calls after me as I run stumbling from the garden, but I don't look back until I've reached the side door. Even then, I only glance long enough to ensure she hasn't followed.

Three days.

I crumple to the floor and bite my arm, sucking desperately. It doesn't help. I need more. *I could go into town, go to Jacob's. Get the bottle I've hidden away just in case.* Only I may not make it in time. If I were to come across anyone on my way…

Too risky.

Besides, Celeste would know. She always knows.

"Monsieur?" Louise's face looms over me, her expression obscured in my blurry vision. She *tsks*, her voice gently scolding. "You shouldn't have vexed her. You know the master has a temper." She bends down, fussing over my arm. I latch onto her wrist.

"Lock me up."

"What?"

I pull her lower, adding as much steel as I can to my raspy voice. “Take me to the dungeon and lock me up until Celeste sends down blood. If you don’t, I fear I may consume you all.”

She only hesitates a moment before nodding. With her help, I make it through the back halls and down into the depths of the castle where a small, three-cell dungeon has been dug out. The bars are rusty and the cell door sticks when Louise tries to open it. My own strength is waning, but I manage it with one good pull before collapsing inside.

“Bring food and water,” I tell her, stretching out on the stale hay. “But under no circumstances are you to let on that I’m down here. Especially not to Adelaide.”

“No offense, Monsieur, but I’m fairly certain she’ll notice your absence. You two have been quite… close since returning.”

“Tell her I’ve been called away on business. Something urgent that required I leave right away.”

“As you wish, Monsieur.”

I leverage myself up on my elbows as I focus on Louise’s shaky figure in the dimly lit space. “Thank you, Louise. Your discretion is appreciated.”

“Of course, Monsieur.”

“And Louise…”

“Yes?”

“I suggest you take a long, hard look at me now, because this is the future you’re working so hard for—a slave bound to Celeste’s whims. I don’t recommend it.”

There’s a long pause before she speaks. “Is that all, Monsieur?”

I sigh. It’s clear she isn’t going to take my advice, but at least I gave it. “No, there’s one more thing. Adelaide—I need you to keep an eye on her. Don’t let Edgar or Ricard trick her into entering the tower while I’m down here. I don’t trust them as much as I do you.”

“That won’t be a problem, Monsieur,” Louise replies. There’s a loud click as she turns the key, locking the cell door. Her voice is gentle, regretful even, but the softness doesn’t ease the gutting agony that comes with her next words:

“Madame has already been to the tower.”

28

BERTRAND

I'm the epitome of selfish naïveté. Had I truly believed she'd be safe simply because I willed it so? That Celeste would be satisfied with a replacement? She may be bound to the tower, but her webs are strong, her whims even stronger. I was a fool to bring Adelaide anywhere near her.

I have to get her out of this place once and for all.

A shame I went and had myself locked away. Yet another prize decision in a long line of brilliant choices. *You just had to have her, didn't you? The beautiful young woman who rode her horse like a bat out of hell and whispered assurances to lingering souls. Who played chess with ghosts and snuck out to swim at the break of day. She was everything you never knew you wanted, and you just couldn't resist.*

Now she'll pay the price for your greed.

Who knows what ungodly horrors Celeste's unhinged mind has planned for her?

My hands fist around the iron bars of the cell, and I focus all of my strength in bending them. No use. Without Celeste's blood, I'm no stronger than an average mortal—a mortal locked in his own dungeon.

Bloody fucking hell.

I slink down against the bars in defeat. "I'm sorry, Adelaide. I'm so, so sorry."

"Meow?"

It's happening, already—I'm losing my mind. Hearing things in the dark. How long before I'm frothing at the mouth and snapping at shadows? Like that one, moving across the back of the cell, its bushy tail twitching. It's barely a wisp of light and dark, and yet I'd swear I was being watched by a pair of silver eyes. When a translucent paw steps into the stream of light granted by the narrow window above, I realize I do, in fact, have a visitor, and an unexpected one at that.

"Whisper?"

The feline specter sits in the middle of my cell, eyeing me cooly. I'm surprised she's not hissing, as she usually does every time I'm near. Not that I blame her for disliking me. Her instincts are spot on. Which begs the question: "What are you doing down here? Why aren't you with your mistress?"

The cat's eyes roll heavenward, and a low growl emanates from her tiny body.

"Ah, I see. You know about Celeste."

Her tail puffs at the mention of the devil's name.

"You know then that Adelaide isn't safe here," I continue, watching the cat with increased interest. Is that why she's here? Our shared concern?

Whisper sniffs, then prowls toward the cell door, keeping a careful distance as she moves past me. Wary, as ever, of my presence. She passes through the bars then stretches up and bats at the lock, claws clicking against the metal. My jaw drops.

"You can make yourself solid?" I knew Adelaide could touch her, but I'd thought that a distinct gift on my wife's part. "I don't suppose you know how to pick locks?"

The look I'm given is pure disdain.

"Right, of course not." I study her face as she stares through the bars. As if she's waiting for something, but what? "Do you know the maid named Louise? Young, blonde, shockingly disloyal?" Whisper dips her head once. I take that as an affirmative. "She has the key in the pocket of her dress. Do you think you could get it?"

She cocks her head, and I can almost hear the words, *Maybe. What's in it for me?*

"I messed up. I know that. I never should have brought Adelaide here, never should have even looked twice in her direction. But I did, and now she's in trouble. If she drinks even a single drop of Celeste's blood after

being fed upon, there'll be no saving her. She'll be bound to my mistress as surely as I am. But if I can get her out, take her away from all this, I should be able to break the thrall Celeste undoubtedly has over her." Of course. How could I have missed it? She's been under Celeste's thrall this entire time. Flying, indeed. "Please, Whisper. Help me help her, and I'll make sure she lives a life free of this castle even if it destroys me in return. I swear it."

Whisper's eyes narrow, and before I can add to my plea, she's gone. Vanished into the ether. I can only pray she's decided to help me. Can only hope that she can.

THE HOURS PASS in eerie silence, the light from above slowly waning as night draws ever closer. Whatever hope I had for a ghostly intervention has faded. What did I expect? That deceased feline had every reason to doubt my intentions, if she even understood me. After all, I was the reason her mistress was in peril to begin with.

I'd leave my sorry self to rot down here as well.

The scrape of a door echoes through the chamber, followed by the soft tread of feet on the stairs. Candlelight illuminates Louise's somber face as she approaches, a basket hanging from her arm, and I immediately scramble to stand.

"How is she? Has Celeste done anything to her? Made her do anything? Is she…" *Is she still human?*

A frown tugs at the corner of Louise's mouth. "Adelaide is fine." There's a bitter edge to her words as she adds, "Mistress Celeste seems quite taken with her. She speaks of little else, always wanting to know what Madame is up to."

She's jealous. A foolish reaction, but perhaps one I can make use of if I play it right. I quietly accept the loaf of bread Louise passes through the bars, murmuring a soft thank you as a wedge of cheese follows. My brows lift in surprise when a glass bottle filled with a deep red liquid appears next.

"Pig's blood," Louise explains. "To take the edge off."

I give her a grateful smile despite the churning of my stomach. Drinking animal blood is even less appealing than harvesting my own, but if it helps

keep me sane, I'll consume every disgusting drop. "Thank you, Louise. That was a thoughtful touch."

"Yes, well." She fiddles with the basket, avoiding my eyes. "You're a better employer than my last one. Men with money and rank often dismiss those of lesser standing, particularly when they're of the opposite gender, but you've always treated me with respect, despite the fact that you're…"

A blood-sucking monster.

The unspoken words hang in the stale air of the dungeon, condemning me with their truth. "How long have you been with us, Louise?"

"Eight years, Monsieur."

I nod. "You came to us in your late teens, having worked as a scullery maid at Dredgeworth Manor, is that correct?"

"*Oui*, Monsieur."

"What did you think of my late wife, Genevieve, and her arrangement with Celeste?"

Louise looks up, meeting my gaze through the bars. "It was a fair arrangement, one many women of my station would envy."

I watch her carefully. "Even though she was confined to the tower, withering away over the course of two decades as Celeste fed off her?"

Louise shrugs. "She had no other prospects, aside from perhaps becoming a companion or a governess, and I suspect neither of those positions are any less mundane. At least here, she was happy."

"Was she?"

"Of course. I don't think I ever saw her without a smile, and she was always singing or humming as she worked her embroidery and such. She had a roof over her head and good food in her belly. What's left to complain of?"

It's easy to forget how others see the tower. Where I see dripping blood and desecrated corpses, they see plain, papered walls. When I hear ghostly wails, they hear birds twittering outside the window. They look at Celeste and see someone to be idolized: a beautiful creature suffering a tragic curse. The horror of what she does—what *we* do—remains shadowed in obscurity. I should tell Louise the truth of it, but escaping this cell takes priority. *Adelaide* takes priority.

I cock my head, looking her over as if noticing her for the first time. "Perhaps I should have made you my seventh wife. I'm sure Celeste would

have appreciated such an eager companion, and god knows I'd be faring better."

A flicker of interest lights her eyes, but she quickly looks away. "An entertaining idea, Monsieur, but a little late. You already have a new wife."

"I do. Until I don't."

She narrows her eyes. "And what, pray, is that supposed to mean?"

I shrug. "Just that if something were to happen to Adelaide, Celeste would require me to obtain a new bride. And given the circumstances, it would be far more discreet to choose one from the household staff. No one on the outside would even need to know."

"Are you implying you'd be willing to kill your own wife? The same wife you imprisoned yourself for mere hours ago?" She scoffs. "Please, Monsieur. Do not take me for a fool."

"You're right. I would never harm Adelaide." I lower my voice as I glance toward the stairs. "But I would have her free of this place, no matter the cost. And as powerful as Celeste may be, she is neither all-knowing nor all-seeing. Bound to that tower room, how is she to know if Adelaide has an accident or not? If the two of us collaborate our stories well enough, we could convince her of Adelaide's death and conveniently present you as an alternative at the same time."

Louise's chest rises, eyes shining eagerly as she breathes, "I could take Adelaide's place at the mistress's side."

"And I could rest easier knowing Adelaide was free." My heart pounds as I watch the idea take root.

She twists her hands around the basket's handle while she mulls it over. After what seems like an eternity, she asks, "What would you have me do?"

Yes. "Let me out of this cell so that I can lure Adelaide from the castle and break her thrall."

Her eyes widen. "You can do that?"

"If I get her far enough away, I believe I can." I hold my breath as her hand slips into her apron pocket, the clink of metal as sweet as a choir of angels.

She pulls the ring of keys out and grips them in her fist, uncertainty playing across her features. "Distance alone won't be enough to break Celeste's hold."

The keys are so close, I'm half-tempted to reach through the bars and grab them. But if I fail and scare Louise off, I'll be right back where I

started. “You’re right. Proximity is only one of the chains binding Adelaide’s mind to the tower. The other is Celeste’s venom in her blood. If I can draw it out, Adelaide will be freed.”

“Of course. No ordinary person could remove it, but you—you’re Mistress Celeste’s favored creation. If anyone could do it, it’d be you.” Louise starts to take a step forward, only to reverse at the last moment as her lips curve into a derisive smile. “So that’s your plan. Interesting.”

No. Something’s wrong here. Louise has never looked at me with such cold indifference. As if I’m nothing more than a spider to be crushed beneath her boot. “Louise, please.” I temper my voice to keep from shouting. “Unlock the door.”

The keys twirl around her finger with a mocking jingle. “I’m afraid I cannot, Monsieur. The master has forbidden it.”

My hands grip the bars as the control I’ve kept on my simmering anger threatens to break. “*I* am the master of this estate, Louise.”

“If you truly believe that, Monsieur, you are nothing more than a fool.” The smirk she gives me makes me want to tear those traitorous lips from her face and shove them down her throat. That she’s right only makes it worse. “Now,” she drawls, giving me a pitying look. “Why don’t you be a good boy and drink the pig’s blood your wife has so graciously allowed you to have? I’m sure she’ll let you out eventually. After all, the way she delighted in feeding off your Adelaide this evening, I doubt the poor girl will last more than a fortnight.”

Metal bites into my palms as a wave of fury surges through my chest, but my voice remains cool and collected as I meet her gaze. “Last chance, Louise. Free me now, or live your remaining days knowing that I *will* kill you. And it won’t be quick.”

A flicker of fear darkens her eyes, but she lifts her chin, lips curling into a snarl. “Mistress Celeste would never allow it.”

“I don’t give a fuck what your mistress allows,” I growl. “I’m done groveling at that wretched creature’s feet.”

“You—”

Her words are cut off with a sharp yowl, and she screams as the hand clutching the keys is shredded by razor-sharp claws—ones only I have the ability to see. While she whips about in a frightened panic, the same invisible claws slicing her ankles to ribbons, I drop to my knees to retrieve the ring of keys that have slid under the bars courtesy of one surprisingly

vicious ghost cat. I have the door open before Louise even realizes she's dropped them.

The dawning look of horror on her face when she sees me standing on the wrong side of the bars brings me more joy than I care to admit. But it isn't nearly as satisfying as the sound her neck makes when it snaps, or the velvety way her blood coats my tongue as I drain every last ounce from her body.

Dissolving the final shreds of my humanity.

Licking my lips, I drop her emptied corpse to the floor and meet the languid gaze of my feline savior. "Well, I guess her death *was* rather quick. I stand corrected."

Whisper blinks up at me, unamused.

"Right, then." I wipe a rogue splatter of blood from my cheek. "Let's go rescue our lady."

29

BERTRAND

The halls are deathly silent as I follow Whisper through the castle, aided only by the slivers of moonlight cutting silvery threads across our path and the faint glow of white emanating from the feline's spectral form. It's as if even my past wives have ceased wailing as they hold their breath, waiting to see what happens next. They're no doubt praying for my demise. A victory I would happily grant them, if it was within my power.

But it's not, and Adelaide is still trapped in this prison.

Faint music breaks the silence, the haunting notes of Beethoven's twenty-seventh opus beckoning me toward the conservatory. Whisper glances over her shoulder as she approaches the wide double doors, her solemn gaze sending the silent message I'm already well aware of: our lady waits on the other side. Do not fail her.

The cat nudges the door, her visage fading into nothingness as she disappears through the solid oak. I rest my hand on the doorknob, heart pounding while the music reaches a crescendo. A part of me longs to linger here, resting my head against the door and listening. Soaking her in. But time is of the essence, and the fresh blood coursing through my veins won't last nearly as long as I'd like.

It's now or never.

Pushing the doors open wide, my gaze swings to the piano set in the far corner of the room where Adelaide sits in a sleeveless nightgown, her midnight hair loose and tumbling about her shoulders while she plays. Her

eyes are closed as I approach, her fingers flying over the ivory keys with a gusto that emphasizes what I love about her: her vibrant fire and the subtle compassion that lies beneath it. She is a movement all on her own—a Sonata in white lace.

I position myself behind the bench, resting my hands on her shoulders as she finishes. Waiting for that final note to fade before I speak.

"That was beautiful."

She twists around on the blue velvet cushion, tilting her face upward with a beatific smile. "Bertrand! I missed you today. When you left the garden this morning, I worried."

"Just a bit of business I'd suddenly recalled," I murmur, cupping her cheek in my hand as I look her over. She's pale, even more so than before. My fingers slide to her neck, where a red silk scarf has been carefully wrapped. It mocks me with its brazen hue, the message behind it clear. Celeste has marked her territory.

My hand shakes as I pull it off, the crimson fabric slipping free and pooling on the floor as I stare at her neck. Fresh punctures mar the porcelain skin, and my body trembles viciously as my worst fears are confirmed: Celeste has been feeding off my bride.

I'll kill her.

No.

Pain—she deserves pain. To be tortured until the last scream has been wrenched from her lungs.

"Bertrand? Is something wrong?"

Adelaide's voice pulls me back to reality, her round eyes staring innocently up at me as I wreak bloody havoc in my mind. *That's right. Celeste can wait. First, I need to remove Adelaide from the grounds and break Celeste's thrall.* I school my features, curving my lips into a teasing smirk. "I'm afraid something's very wrong, love." I let my hand drift lower, toying with the laces of her gown. Her breath catches at my touch, and a pang of regret pierces my chest when her cheeks fail to pink in their usual manner. She had such an exquisite blush before Celeste got her fangs into her. Just one more thing I've robbed her off.

"Pray tell," she breathes, her own hands skimming the length of my thighs.

I steel myself against her touch, forcing myself not to lose focus. "Well, you see," I murmur. "I haven't sampled my beautiful wife since last night,

and I'm half-afraid I've forgotten what she tastes like. Was it peaches with notes of honey? Or honey with notes of peach?" I bend down, sliding a hand beneath her backside as I lift her off the piano bench and into my arms. Her legs wrap around my waist as I hold her, and I nuzzle her hair. "You see my predicament."

She moans as my lips caress her neck, but stiffens when they graze Celeste's mark. When she pushes back against my chest, I retreat and allow her the space. For now, the venom can wait. First, I need to get us off the castle grounds. I begin walking us toward the doors, and her eyes widen, pupils dilating to an unnatural size as she meets my gaze. It emphasizes the receded sockets and the tinge of red rimming her lids. Signs I should have noticed sooner. *Why* didn't I notice sooner?

"Shall we take this to our chambers?" she asks, her voice cooly monotone. I can almost hear Celeste's voice whispering the words in her mind, she's so puppet-like. If I were a better man, I would weep at the sound of it, but I'm not. Any tears I might shed evaporate in the heat of my simmering fury.

"Actually, I was thinking it might be fun to do something a bit more daring." My strides quicken as we enter the hallway.

Her palms splay against my bare chest, nails digging sharply into the skin. "Oh? What did you have in mind?" The words are right, but the delivery remains stiff and scripted. My jaw clenches at the sound.

"I was thinking…" I draw the words out as I hurry us forward, the entrance to the foyer looming ahead. Close now. "I'd like to see how your breasts look bathed in moonlight. I wager it would be a magnificent sight to behold."

"Out-outside?" A note of trepidation creeps into her previous monotone, and her gaze darts to the ceiling. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"It's not a good idea, it's a *splendid* idea." I tighten my hold as she starts to wiggle in a futile attempt to get down. "Marvelous, even."

"No, I… I don't think we should," Adelaide protests, her movements growing frenzied. "It's indecent."

"Indecent?" I scoff. "But we're married. And weren't you the one who first propositioned me that day by the creek? Do you remember, Adelaide?" I look in her blackened eyes, desperation clawing at my chest as I search for a sign that she's still there. But she only throws her head back and screams.

“Help! Please.” Her body trembles uncontrollably, her voice breaking on a sob. “He’s taking me. I can’t let him take—”

I slap a hand over her mouth. “Sorry, love. But I really need you to be quiet right now.”

Her muffled shrieks stop at the thunder of boots on the steps. Ricard charges down the stairs, and a predatory growl rumbles deep in my chest as Adelaide reaches in his direction.

“Back off, Ricard,” I snarl. “We’re leaving.”

The fool plants himself in front of us, a sneer twisting his pug face as he cocks his pistol. “I don’t think so, *master.* The chit remains here. But, uh, you can feel free to fuck off anytime you like. Oh wait, you can’t, can you? Blood bitch.”

“You have no idea who I truly am.” I allow my fangs to extend as I flash a menacing smile. “Or what I’m capable of.” I set Adelaide on her feet as I stare my valet down. He lifts the end of his gun, leveling it at my heart, and I smirk. “Go on then. Shoot me down. Just remember who struck first when all is said and done.”

The metal barrel shakes as he takes a step closer. “Run off to the tower, Madame, and leave this to me. Mistress Celeste will be wanting to see you.”

Adelaide takes a tiny step toward the stairs, but freezes when I turn the full force of my teeth her way with a warning growl. The monstrousness of it must override her need to follow Ricard’s orders, because she turns on her heel and flees through the front door and into the night.

I turn my attention on the man blocking my way to follow, and stalk toward him. “Move. Now.”

His expression hardens. “I take my orders from *her*, not you.”

The pistol fires, and it hurts. It bloody *hurts*. That tiny metal casing burrowing its way into my chest is as hot as a branding iron, and there’s too little of Celeste’s blood inside me to fend off the searing pain. I fight through it, and take a step forward so that I’m nose-to-nose with Ricard. He pales as I wrench the pistol from his hand and toss it to the side.

“I told you not to do that.”

He swings, attempting to punch me in the face, but my fangs are already in his neck by the time I block it, knocking his fist away as I drain him as thoroughly as I did Louise. Only he doesn’t receive the benefit of dying first.

I dump his body in the foyer and hurry out front, my keen vision quickly picking Adelaide out in the darkness. She's standing at the top of the steps that lead down to the pass, the wind plastering her nightgown against her legs as the fabric shines like a beacon in the moonlight. Her arms hang loose at her sides, and she stares vacantly up at the castle like she's forgotten what exactly she was doing.

I move to join her, but a soft voice from behind gives me pause.

"You're going to set her free, aren't you?"

Cressida, my second wife, hovers in the doorway, her freckled face carefully blank. For the first time since her death in 1801, she doesn't look as if she wishes my immediate and excruciating death.

"I am." I hold her unwavering gaze. "As I should have done with you." She deserves more, they all do, but time is running short and I can't afford to leave Adelaide alone for much longer. I pray she understands as I turn and jog down the walkway. An owl screeches overhead, almost burying the faint words that trail after me.

"Good luck."

I smile grimly as I slow to a stop beside Adelaide. I'm going to need all the luck I can get. "There you are, darling." I study her profile, the glazed expression on her face. Has she forgotten her fear already? Or will she try to run? I tense in anticipation. "Are you ready?"

Her gaze inches away from the castle until it's locked with mine. "Ready for what?" She shakes her head, not waiting for an answer. "We shouldn't be out here, it's late."

I catch her wrist as she passes me, pulling her against me while I wrap an arm around her waist. "We're not going back inside, love."

The rise and fall of her chest increases as she throws a panic-stricken look up at the castle. No, not the castle—the tower. "But we must." Her fists strike my chest, and I hiss as her knuckles hit the gaping wound over my heart. It's a testament to the strength of Celeste's hold that Adelaide doesn't even notice the way her hands slip in the blood leaking out—my body too weak to fully close the wound.

I catch her wrists in my hands and pin them behind her back as gently as I can while still holding her in place. "No, Adelaide. You will never enter that place again. I swear it."

"But—"

Her protest dies as my lips clamp onto her neck and my teeth carefully re-open the punctures before I suck. Celeste's venom is like acid on my tongue, but I draw it out until my mouth is full. Spitting the dark substance onto the ground, I wipe my mouth and do it again, suck and spit, suck and spit, until every last trace has been removed. Adelaide slumps forward, and I scoop her into my arms, muscles shaking from the strain as I stumble forward.

The castle doors swing open with a bang, Edgar's shouts carrying over the wind, and the sound fuels my tired limbs, pushing me to move faster as I carry her down the steps to the landing. Waves lap at the shore, the tide already high. I look for the rowboat, but it's nowhere in sight. Shifting Adelaide a bit higher, I wade into the dark water, only to stop short as I feel Celeste's mental tethers clamp down, refusing to let me move. Edgar must have alerted her of my escape, the old bastard.

If I can make it to the other side, I should be far enough to resist her pull.

A promising thought, if only I could move.

Adelaide stirs, curling into me so that her cheek is pressed against my chest. Her lips part on a sigh, her soft breath ghosting my wound. It creates the most soothing sting I've ever felt, and I cling to the feeling for all I'm worth as I attempt to drive my leg forward.

I can almost hear Celeste's outraged shriek when it does.

Gritting my teeth, I focus on the other leg, sweat beading my forehead as I slowly push through the waves. I clutch Adelaide like a talisman, breathing her in when I stumble. Drawing from her presence. It's a fragile strength, different from the raw power I feel when I drink Celeste's blood, but it's enough. And as my toes dig into the soil on the other side, I feel those wretched tethers snap at the same moment Adelaide's eyes blink open, her startled gaze meeting mine as I drop to my knees in exhaustion and lay her carefully on the ground.

"You…" Her eyes widen, and she scrambles away as horror stains her face. She presses a hand against her neck and whimpers when she draws back bloody digits, her confused gaze lingering there for a long moment before it lifts. Gutting me with its accusation. "What *are* you?"

My hands ball into fists, knuckles digging into the soil as I hang my head in defeat. "I'm your villain."

Act Four

In which Adelaide finds
herself married to a monster.

30

ADELAIDE

Too much. This is all just… too much. Ghosts, I've learned to cope with. They're both comforting and terrifying by turns, but at least I know when I'm looking one in the eye. There's no hiding what they are behind a mask of humanity. And I most certainly wouldn't marry one by mistake.

"A villain." I eye Bertrand with wary caution. "What does"—I swallow over a wince, head aching miserably—"what exactly does that mean?" I touch the still-bleeding marks on my neck, a fuzzy image of Bertrand growling with a flash of razor-sharp canines creeping into my head. It jumps to another picture, another set of fangs bared as a woman leans in close. My hand slides to the back of my neck, fingers pressing against a tender spot at the base of my skull. "That woman, in the tower"—my voice stutters at the memory of that accursed room and its bloody walls—"are you…" I avert my gaze, unable to look at this man I thought I knew, thought I *loved*. This stranger. "Are you like *her*?"

"Yes. And no." His voice is tight, like he's trying very hard to control it, and there's a raspy edge that makes me want to pull him into my arms and kiss the pain away. I tuck my hands under my folded arms, pinning them to my sides.

He used you. Lied to you. Don't forget—don't you dare forget.

"Which is it? Yes or no? Because you're either human or you're…" *A monster.* I can't bring myself to voice it. If I say it, it'll be real, and there'll be no going back after that.

“It’s… complicated.” Bertrand runs a hand over his face, fingers tugging at his beard. “If you truly wish to know, I promise I’ll tell you everything. Only it’s a long story and”—he lets out a hiss, jaw clenching as if in pain—“we’re running out of time. If I don’t drink my tonic soon, it’ll be disastrous for everyone.”

“Your tonic.” Panic claws up my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs. “But your flask… I thought it was empty.” My hand instinctively cups my neck, covering the blood-slick wound as I flinch farther away.

A shadow passes over his face as his eyes track my movements, but he soon turns away, rising to his feet as he faces the dirt path leading the way we came in on that first night. “It is, but I have a small reserve hidden away in my safe house. If we leave now, we should be able to reach it before it’s too late.”

“We?” I stare slack-jawed at the back of his head. “Surely you don’t expect me to be foolish enough to go with you?”

The slightest pause, then, “It’s either that or wander into town on your own. A lone woman wearing nothing but a ruined nightgown in the dead of night.”

Bloody hell, he’s right. Worse yet, I only passed through the town briefly when it was dark and rainy. Who knows if I could even find it on my own? Still… is the alternative any better?

“I won’t hurt you, Adelaide. I swear it.” His voice is resigned, as if he knows exactly what thoughts are running through my head.

My heart breaks a bit more as I whisper, “You already have.”

His shoulders slump, and he nods. “Well, I won’t tonight. You have my word, for all it’s worth.”

I shouldn’t trust him, not after everything that’s happened. I’m still not even certain what *has* happened or what exactly he is. But the truth is I’m cold, and the untold dangers lurking in the dark feel far more worrisome than the broken man standing before me. So I take a trembling step forward and utter the only word I can manage. “Okay.”

His sigh of relief is whisper soft. “Follow me.”

And so I do.

We stick to the road, Bertrand keeping his distance as we trudge up the hill. He must not be concerned about anyone from the castle coming after us, and I doubt anyone from town would come this way at night. We walk in wordless silence, the night wind and rustle of grass filling the space

between us. More than once I open my mouth to speak, only to clamp it shut again. There are too many questions that need to be answered. Far too many for this dark, lonely road with my damp nightgown clinging to icy thighs and thin silk slippers all but falling off my feet. My muscles clench beneath the chill, protesting each labored step until they lock up altogether and send me tumbling forward with a soft cry. Pebbles dig into my palms as I catch myself, and I let out a strangled sob as the enormity of all that has passed lands on my hunched shoulders with a resounding crash.

I can't do this.

I can't…

"Adelaide?" Bertrand's pained voice whispers through the night, the sound of my name on his lips driving the dagger of hurt even deeper.

We're at a casual house party held by a family friend. It's perfectly acceptable to use given names.

I couldn't agree more. Adelaide.

A sob shudders through my chest, racking my shoulders as I grind my fingers into the gritty dirt road. What a complete and utter fool I was.

"Adelaide." Bertrand's increasing concern is evident in his tone as he crouches in front of me. "Are you all right?" His hand hovers over my shoulder for a moment, but he quickly retracts it, turning his face away as he mutters, "Idiot. Of course she isn't all right." He takes a deep breath. "Do you think you can keep walking? The road is quiet now, but it'd be unwise to tarry here too long. Best to get to the safe house before the village awakens."

I shake my head slowly, the numbness of my body enveloping me in a cocoon of static. The words he's saying sound right, but I can't quite make sense of them. I can't make sense of anything. The ground is opening up, sucking me into a black hole of oblivion. "I can't…"

I barely register the feel of strong, cold hands lifting me up before the darkness swallows me whole.

31

BERTRAND

I'm trembling with fatigue by the time I arrive outside Jacob Bastin's farmhouse, a full mile outside town. The windows of the light gray three-story are dark, but I rap on the door anyway. He'll be grumpy as a bear to be woken, but there's nothing for it. The room I pay him to keep for me is inside. My single, precious secret from Celeste.

Adelaide stirs in my arms, her delicate form curling into me as if seeking some modicum of warmth. I swallow a curse as I glance down at her blue-tinged lips and knock again, louder this time. Trudging footsteps from inside answer my summons at last, and I all but collapse with relief when the door cracks open and Jacob's bearded face appears. Bushy eyebrows lower over a thunderous expression when he sees the woman passed out in my arms and his voice is a barely controlled growl.

"Is this what you meant by emergencies? You pay well, Monsieur, but I draw the line at disposing bodies."

The door swings toward my face, and I only just wedge my foot between it and the frame before it clicks shut. "She's not dead. But she will be if you don't pull your head out of your ass and let us in."

Jacob frowns, but he opens the door with a grunt and steps back, allowing me to carry Adelaide inside. His gaze flicks to her blood-smeared neck, and I can see his jaw working beneath the mass of facial hair that makes my own beard look like peach fuzz. "What happened to her?"

I cradle her against my chest as I attempt a staggered step up the stairs. "She married me."

Another grunt, and I don't have the energy to protest as Jacob takes her from my arms and carries her up the stairs ahead of me. I follow close behind, with Jacob turning sideways as we enter the narrow stairwell leading up to the third floor where I keep my private chambers—my safe house should Celeste ever cut me off as she has now. A temporary fix, but it'll grant me enough time to see Adelaide taken care of. After that…

I grip the railing as thoughts of what I have to do threaten to drag me down. *You knew this day was coming,* I remind myself. *It's why you rent these rooms, why you studied and searched every time you were granted leave. You've just been too much of a coward to see it through.* My knuckles whiten as my hold on the banister tightens, and I focus on the raven hair and bare feet peeking out from the other side of Jacob's broad form.

I will *see it through.*

For her.

The edges of my vision grow dark as the first hint of thirst crawls its way up my throat, and I stumble up the last few steps on shaky legs. I can smell Jacob's blood pumping beneath thick skin, can scent the tangy-sweet pomegranate of Adelaide's dwindling supply. It calls to the monster inside, like a siren luring drunken sailors to their icy deaths.

I surge past Jacob as he fumbles with the door, bolting into the dark room and tearing aside the heavy, braided rug spread out in front of the fireplace. I don't wait for Jacob to leave as I normally would, giving away one of my secrets as I pry open the loose floorboard. To his credit, he doesn't say a word as I pull out the dusty blue bottle and unstopper it, nor does he flinch when I raise it to my lips and gulp it down like a half-crazed addict. He simply walks to the bed tucked in the corner and lays Adelaide down before pulling a wool blanket over her shivering body.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand as the monster slowly retreats. Driving the cork back into the bottle, I mutter, "Thank you, Jacob."

The large beast of a man whom I've known since he was child—and I was more or less the same as I am now—crosses his arms, making no move to leave Adelaide's side. "She'll need dry clothes."

I nod, my body thrumming from the feel of Celeste's blood rushing through my veins. Already my head is clearer, the way more certain. There's much to do and little time to do it in. "I keep a few sets of clothes here, they'll do well enough for tonight. But she'll need appropriate clothes for travel, enough to see her through to Calais and across the Channel to

England. Nothing fancy but clean and respectable." I draw a small pouch from beneath the floor and toss it toward Jacob, the coins inside jingling as he catches it in his meaty fist. "Can I count on you to fetch them for me?"

He turns the pouch over in his hand and glances over his shoulder at my sleeping wife. "Heading to England now, are ya?"

"Not me, just her. I have business to take care of at the castle that is long overdue."

He nods. "When will she be needing 'em by?"

I run over my to-do list in my head. I'll need to meet with my solicitor, set up an account in her name. A carriage needs to be arranged and passage booked for both Adelaide and a companion across the Channel. Someone who'd be available at the last minute but also trustworthy. My gaze falls to the bottle, a quarter gone already. I'll need to act fast. "Two days. Sooner if you can."

"Aye, I can manage that."

"Good." I stand, strength fully restored, and cross the room to join him beside the bed. Adelaide stirs in her sleep, and I gently take her hand in mine, brushing my thumb over her fingers. "She'll be hungry when she wakes. Thirsty too. If you could bring us up something warm, I'd appreciate it. I'll tend to the rest."

Jacob looks down at Adelaide's and my hands and clears his throat. "You've done a lot for this town, Monsieur—done a lot for *me*—and we've always kept our mouths shut in return. Never asking questions or sticking our noses where they don't belong, but seeing this lady here the way she is…" He lifts his gaze, eyes filled with the hard determination of someone who knows they'll regret their words but has no choice but to voice them. "Those marks on her neck. Was it you that put them there?"

I return Adelaide's hand to her side, carefully tucking the blanket back into place before meeting Jacob's gaze with as much honesty as I can afford. "No. But I might as well have."

He remains statue still, studying me intently. "And after that boat takes her to England and wherever it is she calls home, will you be finding yourself a new wife?"

Fear whispers in my ear, telling me that's exactly what I should do. Return Adelaide to safety and wed another, someone without a hold on my heart. Someone who wouldn't mind trading a lifetime of monotony for the decade or two of bliss Celeste's thrall would trick them into feeling before

she bled them dry. The wives never suffered, never fell ill. Never labored or grew bored from the lack of it. Their ever-present smiles spoke of a life of happiness, and yet their ghosts told a different story—one that deserved an ending. “Not this time, Jacob,” I reply, resolutely pushing the fear aside.

Never again.

32

ADELAIDE

What a strange and terrifying dream. Blood-sucking monsters, midnight escapes. Marguerite would laugh herself into stitches if I told her all the things my brain had conjured while I was asleep. Not that I'd tell her. It'd only add fuel to her non-believing fire. Still, I really ought to write her again, even if she has yet to respond. I imagine she's terribly cross with me for running off and marrying Bertrand without confiding in her. Stretching my arms over my head with a yawn, I blink up at the ceiling as my eyes adjust to the light. The low ceiling that looks nothing like the one in my room.

What on Earth?

I look down at the heavy wool blanket. Definitely *not* the soft velvet and silk sheets I usually sleep under. My stomach lurches as I turn my head. This isn't Bertrand's and my room at all. Bare, windowless walls form a sizable box around me, with sunlight streaming in from a circular skylight above. A fire crackles in the fireplace, with a blue and yellow braided rug spread over the wood plank floor in front of it. The bed I'm currently stretched out in is tucked into the darkest corner, with the only other furniture in view being a faded settee in front of the fire and an open roll-top desk with a straight-backed chair on the opposite end of the room. The corner closest to the bed is sectioned off with a white sheet, and I hesitantly sit up and scoot to the end of the bed as I attempt to make out any shapes behind the fabric.

“Hello?” I whisper. “Is anyone here?” No response. I raise my voice. “Bertrand?” Silence is my answer, and I can only assume I’m alone in this strange room. My head aches as I try to remember how I got here. It doesn’t make sense, unless…

Oh god.

It wasn’t a dream at all.

Panic squeezes the air from my lungs, and I slide onto the floor, bracing my back against the bed as I struggle to catch my breath. I have to get up, have to run. It’s not safe here, it’s not—

“Meow.”

The sound of Whisper’s plaintive mew is a balm on my frazzled nerves, and I release a shuddering breath as the feline appears in front of me, delicate white paws padding soundlessly across the floor as she approaches. My hands shake as I gather her into my arms, pressing my face into her cool fur. “Everything’s going to be all right.” I run my fingers along her back. “We just need to stay calm and assess the situation.”

Right. Starting with where in the name of Queen Victoria are we? I vaguely remember waking up on the shore with Bertrand hunched beside me in nothing but a pair of soaked trousers. The memory makes me think of another time I found Bertrand drenched and hovering over me, back at Madame Gossard’s. *When he saved me from the specter in the lake.* I had thought it heroic at the time, but now I can’t help but wonder—was he saving me for someone else?

Hypnotic eyes, teeth piercing my flesh…

Nails claw at the tender skin of my neck, and I pull my hands away with a startled jerk when I realize they’re my own. *Stop it, Adelaide. You can’t think of it right now. Focus on your current situation. The past will keep.* Taking a deep breath, I force myself to look down and catalog what I have on—which isn’t much. A collared white dress shirt brushes the top of my bare thighs, and I lift the sleeve to my nose without thinking. Sandalwood with an underlying hint of spice. *Bertrand’s cologne.* Something tugs at my heart, something that feels an awful lot like longing.

I frown. *None of that, either. He’s the one who got you into this mess in the first place.* Cuddling Whisper firmly against my chest, I push up to my feet, listing to the side as a wave of dizziness makes the room spin around me. I count to ten and breathe as it gradually comes to a standstill. Taking careful steps across the floor, I tiptoe over to the desk where I spy a piece of

parchment with a note scrawled on it and—my stomach rumbles a cheer—a covered bowl with a spoon placed beside it. The savory aroma of beef and vegetables fills my nose as I lift the cover, and I forgo the manners Marguerite drilled into me as a girl as I lift the bowl straight to my lips.

It tastes like Heaven.

Another long sip and I at last relent and pick up the spoon, which I use to ladle delicious mouthfuls as I read the accompanying note:

Adelaide,

If you're reading this, I have no doubt you're feeling frightened and confused. I hope to be back before you wake, but should that not be the case, please know that you are safe here. The home you're in belongs to an honest farmer named Jacob Bastin, who rents this room to me in case of unforeseen emergencies. Celeste—the woman in the tower—does not know of its existence, nor do any of the castle staff. Please sit tight and trust that I'm doing everything I can to take care of you.

Bertrand

Sit tight. Trust me. Ha! The parchment crumples in my fist, and I throw the wadded note into the fire. He must think me a fool if he expects me to sit around in this room waiting for his return. And I'm to trust him? This, from the same man who married me when he was, in fact, already wed to another? And to a monster, no less. He claimed to love me, but how am I to believe it when faced with the cold truth? Our marriage has been nothing but a chain of lies, and I, for one, am finished playing the naive wife.

I head straight for the door and grasp the knob, only to mutter a curse when it remains firmly shut. The bastard locked me in. Seething, I check the curtained corner, swiping the fabric aside as I search for another way out, but the only things concealed there are a chipped, porcelain toilet and washstand.

I make use of them both, relieving myself before pouring water from the pitcher placed on the lower shelf into the empty basin and using the sliver of soap to scrub my hands and face. It smells faintly of rose petals, and I find myself bracing my hands on either side of the stand as I stare hopelessly into the mirror.

What am I going to do if he takes me back there?

Flashes of dark, curving stairs leading to bloody walls dance through my mind as a silent scream builds deep inside my chest. Only the brush of

fur weaving through my ankles keeps me from releasing it, Whisper's weight against my legs tethering me to the present.

He says he's going to take care of me, but what if this is all some sick game he and the white-haired creature play with their victims? The romantic in me refuses to believe it, but the more cynical side is too loud to be ignored. If I'm stuck here, I should at least try to defend myself.

But with what?

I bite my lip, hands on my hips as I examine the room in consternation. The fire poker? Perhaps, although I suspect I've grown too weak to deal any substantial blows. Something in the desk, maybe. I start pulling out drawers and rifling through their contents. Stationary, wax, pens… I pause over a slender letter opener. The silver is tarnished from age, but the blade looks surprisingly sharp. Almost dagger-like. My fingers curl around the handle, the cool metal fitting snugly in the palm of my hand. A shiver runs down my spine as I slide the drawer shut and perch on the edge of the settee, gaze locked on the door.

And now we wait.

33

BERTRAND

The sun is already well into the sky by the time my meeting with Monsieur Moreau, my garrulous solicitor, is finished. His thin lips purse in annoyance as I snap a sharp "good day" on my way out of his office, but my nerves are too shot to care. Adelaide will surely be awake by now, locked away in the room like a prisoner. I hate myself for doing it, but I couldn't risk leaving her on her own. For a woman cursed to spend eternity in a lonely tower, Celeste has more eyes in the village than one would expect, and I glimpsed Griffon holding a hushed conversation with the carriage master this morning as I skulked past. It seems I'll have to enlist Jacob to secure a carriage as well as traveling clothes.

As soon as I'm clear of the town, I sprint through the open fields, the dose of Celeste's blood I drank earlier giving me wings. The loose pants and work shirt Jacob lent me to help blend in flap in the wind, and I tear the brown leather cap from my head before it flies off completely. Jacob's farmhouse rises up behind a hedgerow of untamed brambles, and I leap over it in my haste to be back. The man himself waves at me from the side of the house, where he is on his knees, diligently weeding his vegetable garden. I'm fairly certain I wave back, but in all honesty it's hard to be sure when all I can think about is Adelaide waiting inside.

What must she think of me?

Certainly nothing good.

I slow my pace as I enter the house, heart pounding as I make my way upstairs. The walls of the narrow stairwell leading to the attic room feel as

though they're pressing in on me with each nerve-wracking step. I pause as I reach the landing, listening for sounds of movement inside the room, but all I hear is the caw of a crow outside and a hint of uneven breathing.

She's awake and waiting.

It's time to face my judgment.

Bracing myself, I turn the key in the lock and open the door. My gaze immediately lands on Adelaide seated directly in front of me on the settee. Her hair falls around her shoulders in a tangled disarray, her round eyes and strained expression reminding me of a deer staring down a hunter's barrel. She's terrified, and it's entirely my fault. I search for something to say, anything that might offer a modicum of comfort, but before I can string two words together she springs from her seat and charges with a guttural shriek.

One hand strikes my chest, the other freezes inches from my heart, knuckles whitening as it clutches a silver blade. The tip presses lightly against my shirt, and I hold Adelaide's gaze as she stares up at me in confusion.

"Why?" she whispers. "Why can't I do it?"

Her lip quivers, and it's all I can do not to kiss it. Instead, I lift my hand and lay it gently over the fist still holding the knife against my heart. "If it will make you feel better, then we can do it together. Although, I'm afraid the results won't be as permanent as you hope."

A tear slips from the corner of her eye, and I pray that she does stick the blade into my heart. Anything to dull the painful ache radiating from its center. But she doesn't, and the makeshift weapon clatters on the floor as her arms fall listlessly to her side. There's a long pause as she searches my face for answers I'm loathe to give.

"What *are* you?"

Three simple words, and yet they cut deeper than any knife or sword ever could. I swallow. "It's complicated."

Her lips press together, and I swear she grows taller. "Complicated." She nods. "That's what you always say, isn't it? It's complicated. You wouldn't understand. Just leave it." Her arms fold over her chest. "I'm done leaving well enough alone, Bertrand. I don't care if it's complicated or if we don't have time—you'll tell me everything, and you'll do it now."

Sweet mercy, I love this woman.

"It's a long story"—I raise a hand, seeing the protest forming on her lips —"but you're right. You deserve to hear it. And as for time, I'm afraid

we're stuck in here until tomorrow anyway, when a carriage will be ready to take you home."

She reels backward. "So you *do* plan to take me back there."

I immediately see my mistake and hurry to assure her. "No, of course not. Adelaide, I'm sending you to England, to your *home*."

Her mouth forms a circle, a surprised "oh" slipping out. I watch her closely, desperate to know what she's thinking, how she feels. The thought of losing her is shredding my soul, but the alternative is too selfish to consider. I'm done playing that game.

When she fails to add anything else, I gesture to the settee with as much calm as I can manage. "My story then, in all its wretched glory… if you're sure you still wish to hear it?"

Her chest rises on an inhale, and I may be wrong but I swear her expression softens a bit as it falls. "I'm sure." She takes a seat on the settee, folding her hands in her lap and tilting her head in expectation. "Tell me everything."

Everything. Right. I can do this.

34

BERTRAND

I move to face the fireplace, clasping my hands behind my back as I decide where to begin. The day I met Celeste? But no, that's not right. The tale truly begins ten years prior, when I found my life drained of meaning.

"The year was 1734," I start off, the words stiff and formal as I brace for the inevitable feelings I've succeeded so well in burying all these years.

A soft gasp interrupts me, and I look over my shoulder to find Adelaide gaping at me in surprise.

"1734? But that's…"

"A hundred and forty-five years ago?"

She shakes her head in disbelief, but gestures for me to continue.

I clear my throat, returning my attention to the crackling flames in front of me. "I had just completed my tenure at Eton College. I was eighteen and set to return home for the first time in almost a year. I was anxious to leave, having not received word from my family in months."

I pause, thinking of the bundle of letters hidden below the floorboards. They'd arrived every two weeks like clockwork before then, and I've kept them close ever since, each loosely-penned sentence burned into my memory:

I can't wait for you to come home, Brother. You are going to adore the puppy Father and Mother gifted me for my birthday. She's all paws and fluffy tail wagging, and I absolutely love her to pieces. You'll laugh when

you hear what I've named her, but I think I'll wait and tell you in person. The look on your face is bound to be priceless.

Over a century, yet they cut as deep as ever.

I clear my throat, the burning tightness adding a strained edge to my voice. Usually I would try to hide it, to maintain my cool exterior, but I'm tired of playing a part. Besides, Adelaide deserves better than that. I turn and face her, meeting her shuttered gaze as I continue.

"The morning I was to depart, I was called into the headmaster's office and informed I did not, in fact, have a family to return home to. It would seem the entirety of the household had fallen ill to smallpox, without a single survivor."

Adelaide's eyes flare wide as I choke the last statement out, but she remains still, waiting for me to go on.

I drag a hand through my hair, further disheveling it. "Apparently my father had given everyone strict instructions that I be kept in the dark, lest I be tempted to come home. He didn't want me exposed." A decision I still struggle to forgive. He meant to keep me safe but ultimately deprived me of saying goodbye to the people I loved most. "I lost not only him, but my mother and fifteen-year-old sister, Constance. A household staff that had helped raise me from infancy." I look away, focusing instead on a swirling knot of wood in the floor. "My will to live."

Adelaide makes a noise of distress, and I shake my head, a sad smile ghosting my lips. "Don't worry, that sympathy you're feeling right now will soon disperse. Because that life my father so carefully guarded? I may not have had the audacity to end it, but I did a thorough job of wasting it. Drinking, whoring, gambling—I embraced it all. I abandoned my ancestral home and spent the next ten years traveling from one place to another, sampling every distraction they had to offer. Which is how I came to find myself in a shabby inn on the outskirts of Strasbourg in October of 1744, half out of my mind on a laudanum-induced high. My drug of choice at the time."

The hazy memory of that day sets my nerves on edge, and I take to pacing back and forth in front of the settee. Every now and then I glance down at Adelaide, who remains attentive as she patiently waits for me to continue. Aside from the single, soft reaction to my family's deaths, her expression has remained inscrutable—our initial roles upon first meeting reversed. I try not to dwell on what she might be thinking as I push forward.

“The entire city had taken to the streets that day in anticipation of Louis the Fifteenth’s arrival, with everyone fighting for a glimpse of the king. The world outside was a brightly lit festival, but in my dark room there was only me—a withering husk of a man. I’d gotten myself into a right stupor when Celeste came barging into the room. She took one look at me and said “you’ll do.” I couldn’t even summon the sense of mind to ask what for. All I could do was lie there as she crawled on top of me, pinning me to the bed.”

I recall the blurry memory of her red eyes and glistening fangs hovering over me. The cold certainty that I was about to die. The regret.

I’d wasted the life my family so desperately wanted me to live.

“I woke to a stream of blue liquid trickling down my throat from an open vein on her wrist. Moments later my door was being broken down once again. This time by a group of masked figures. I’d later learn they were witches—a coven hailing all the way from Vienna. They’d been chasing Celeste for weeks and had finally caught up with her outside Strasbourg, where they’d begun laying the foundation for a binding curse. It would seem Celeste had drained the life of one of their own at the Mehigrube, in the early hours of the morning following the harlequin ball.”

The faces of my past wives parade through my memory, each one young and meek—grateful for even the smallest scrap of attention. “She’s always had a penchant for wallflowers,” I explain, clenching my fists in shame. They would never have come here had I not led them. Would never have been doomed to a life in that dreadful tower. “Little did she know that particular bloom was guarded by a host of thorns. It would have been her undoing, had she not prepared a fail-safe.”

My throat tightens as guilty shame overwhelms me, and I scrub a hand over my face as I struggle to speak the words that will damn me in Adelaide’s eyes forever. To my surprise, however, it’s not my voice that says them, but hers.

“She made you,” Adelaide whispers. “The liquid she forced you to drink was her blood. The same blood you kept in a flask—the tonic you forbid me to drink. It changed you, didn’t it? Made you like her.”

“No one’s like her, not truly,” I reply. “We share commonalities, of course. We’re both monsters who crave the taste of blood, abominations best left to the shadows. But she’s something more, something ancient. The power she holds over those in her thrall is unthinkably strong. Only distance can weaken it.”

Adelaide shakes her head. “I don’t understand. If she’s so powerful, why would she need a fail-safe? Why didn’t she simply cast the witches under her thrall and be done with them?” Her gaze skims my mouth, and I have no doubt the shiver that runs down her frame is due in part to the memory of me snarling at her in the castle. When she looks away, her voice is barely audible as she whispers, “Why involve you at all?”

I sit on the corner of the bed with a sigh, bracing my forearms against my thighs as I lean forward. “I asked myself the same question for years. Every time Celeste would send me out into the world on her behalf, I would use the opportunity to search for answers. I traced the coven back to its origin and was able to procure one of the member’s journals. It mentioned a medallion that could protect the wearer against the ‘“blood witch’s” mind powers. It was how they managed to capture her in the first place and ink the binding runes onto her skin. She escaped before they finished, however, and it would seem I was the first secluded fool she stumbled upon. She turned me into a weapon—an explosive on the verge of detonation—that only she could control. And when they stepped inside that shabby little room, she lit the fuse.”

I can still hear the witches’ screams and Celeste’s triumphant cackle. Can still recall the copper-tang of their blood on my tongue—my first feed as Celeste’s dutiful pet. It turns the contents of my stomach to acid, and I swallow the rising bile as I push the memory back down.

“She had you kill them,” Adelaide says. There’s no accusation in her voice, and yet her words twist in my gut like a dagger.

All I can do is nod.

Her brow furrows. “But if that’s true… how did she end up at your castle, bound to the tower?” She stands, taking over my previous pacing. “And why would the coven want to bind her in the first place? If they were able to restrain her long enough to ink runes or whatnot on her skin, why not, I don’t know, chop her head off or something? Surely she can be killed *somehow*.”

I should probably be shocked by her nonchalant suggestion of beheading, but I’m far too fascinated by the intensity in her expression, the way her nose scrunches up as she works things out in her head. As if there’s a mystery to be solved, and she’s determined to get to the bottom of it. Her gaze meets mine, and it takes me a moment to realize she’s expecting me to fill in the gaps.

I clear my throat. “Those are excellent questions.”

“Of course they are. As I’ve said, I’m a clever woman.”

“That you are.” I allow myself a brief moment to drink her in before supplying the answers she seeks. “And you’re right, of course. Celeste can be killed, though not easily. I believe decapitation and incineration of the body are required.”

Adelaide’s eyes widen, her hands flying up in exasperation. “Then why—?”

“Because the moment she dies, she’s reborn,” I explain, releasing a frustrated sigh. “Death will only stall her, not stop her. Not for long. The witches in the coven knew that, so they came up with an alternative—binding her someplace no one could reach, somewhere no one could fall prey to her influence. The journal suggested they planned to seal her in a coffin and bury her deep underground.”

Adelaide gasps. “They were going to bury her alive? But that’s… that’s…”

“Cruel?” I give her a tight smile, the threads of fear I’ve been pointedly ignoring coiling around my neck like a noose. Spending an eternity buried alive is a torture beyond comprehension, and yet how else can you keep an immortal monster contained when its leash is severed? *If I can take Celeste with me, it’ll be worth it.* “No more cruel than playing with people’s minds and stealing their freedom of choice.”

“Perhaps a *bit* more cruel,” Adelaide mutters, looking unconvinced. She shakes her head. “So she can be killed, but it’s only temporary. That explains why they tried to bind her, but it doesn’t explain how she ended up locked in your family’s tower.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out the iron key I keep on my person at all times—a key to the tower. Turning it over in my hands, I swallow the growing lump in my throat. It’s been years since she’s taken over that room. It shouldn’t hurt as much as it does, not anymore. And yet my chest aches all the same. “When I was growing up, the North Tower was my sanctuary, my secret hideout. Or not-so-secret hideout, as apparently everyone in the household knew I liked to squirrel away up there with my spyglass and my books, acting out boyish fantasies and drowning in literary adventures. When my sister was old enough to be a viable playmate, she joined me there, taking on the role of vicious dragon to my heroic knight. It was our special place. After she died…”

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the tears away, but the memories are too bright, too sharp. The moisture runs along the crease of my eyelids until it can no longer be contained and a drop trickles down my face. A featherlight touch whisks it away.

My eyes fly open.

Adelaide is crouched in front of me, her hand hovering an inch away from my cheek. “I’m listening.”

“After she died,” I rasp, “I wore the key around my neck like a talisman. It was there that day, hanging over my heart as I tore through the witches like a feral beast, drenching myself in their blood. It was there as Celeste laughed and praised me, allowing me to drink from her wrist as a reward. It was there as I wiped my mouth, painting my palm sapphire blue. I grasped it out of habit, mixing Celeste’s blood with the blood of the coven and unwittingly finishing the ritual. I bound her to my most special place, and shackled myself even more tightly at the same time. She’s stuck in the tower, and I dwell at her beck and call, relying on her blood to keep myself sane as she devises new ways to punish me.”

But not for much longer. As selfish as my marriage to Adelaide was, it’s done what nothing else has before: it’s pushed me to be a better man. As the contents of the bottle I keep stored beneath the floorboards dwindle, so does my reprieve. Once I’ve seen Adelaide safely off in the carriage, I’ll return to the castle. And this time, neither I nor Celeste will be leaving.

My penance begins in the morning.

35

ADELAIDE

Never in my life have I felt so excruciatingly torn. On the one hand, Bertrand hid his past and married me despite the danger he must have known he'd be putting me in. He's aided Celeste in a myriad of horrible things, even murdering at her command. On the other hand, a part of me still loves him in spite of it all.

A strange feeling indeed.

He's grown silent, a pensive look on his face as he stares over my shoulder. I suppose that means his story is over, but there's a detail that still itches at my brain—a missing piece to the puzzle that is Bertrand and Celeste.

Lord, I hate the sound of their names together. It should be Bertrand and Adelaide, Adelaide and Bertrand. I sit back on my heels, a frown tugging at my mouth. "Don't you think there's something you're leaving out? *Husband?*"

Bertrand blinks, breaking his trance on the rug. "What do you mean? I've told you everything."

I fold my arms over my chest. "Is that so?"

He hesitates, his gaze darting back over my shoulder. "Have I left something out?"

"Only that you married me when you *already have a wife*. Care to tell me what that's all about?" Anger, yes. Indignation. These are the feelings I need to cling to if I'm to keep from throwing myself in his arms and kissing his pain away.

“Ah, that.”

“Yes, *that*.”

Bertrand scrubs a hand over his face, grimacing as his fingers skim the short hairs of his beard. “The binding curse, it had some strange effects on Celeste’s mind. Possibly from being cast so far from the location itself. Returning to the castle from Strasbourg was intense. Every moment Celeste wasn’t in the tower the curse twisted her sanity, the memories and emotion infused within that simple key somehow spilling into her head. At first she was confused, maddeningly so. Then, once she’d reached the tower and the pain the curse was inflicting eased, she grew attached. She clung to me, holding me under her thrall for weeks at a time. At one point she began referring to me as her dear brother, but even under the weight of compulsion, I rebelled at her use of it. Eventually she started calling me husband instead, but it was never a real marriage. Not like ours.”

So our marriage isn’t a complete sham after all. I shouldn’t feel relieved, but a small, stubborn part of me refuses to relinquish my claim as Bertrand’s wife. As foolish a decision as it may have been, it was mine, and in a life ruled by an overbearing brother and well-intentioned sister, how often have I been able to truly say that?

“She’s not your wife then.” I bite my lip. “But have the two of you ever…?”

Bertrand’s eyes widen, and he shakes his head in adamant revulsion. “No. God, no. Not that I would have had much choice should she have wished it, but fortunately she hates me as I much as I loathe her, despite her unnatural attachment.”

I hadn’t even considered the fact that she could have forced herself on Bertrand or any of his past wives. The thought of it makes me shiver, and Bertrand quickly stands and adds wood to the dying fire.

“I’m sorry about the limited attire,” he says, stirring the embers with an iron poker. “It was all I had on hand, and I’m afraid your nightgown was beyond saving. I’ve asked Jacob to acquire the necessary items for your trip home, however, so hopefully he’ll have those ready soon and you can change into something warmer.”

I run my hand over the white, button-down shirt, fingers toying with the hem. “That seems to be becoming a trend—hasty departures requiring new clothes. I swear I’ve worn more new dresses this past month than old. When I bothered to dress at all, that is,” I add, recalling those first few days at the

castle, ensconced in our chambers. Traitorous heat flutters between my legs just thinking about it, and I squeeze my thighs together.

Bertrand's gaze flickers in my direction, his posture stiffening, and his fists clench at his sides as he turns and strides toward the door. "I should see to arranging your passage," he says gruffly, not meeting my eyes. "I won't lock the door, but please, stay here today. Celeste has connections throughout the town, and I have no doubt Edgar and Griffon have already been in touch with them regarding your disappearance."

I nod my consent, chest tightening as he opens the door and steps onto the landing. My hand reaches out as if to stop him, but I snatch it back before he sees. Attempting to sound unconcerned, I ask, "When will you be back?"

He hesitates. "Before dark, but I can ask Jacob to let me sleep downstairs if you wish."

"No." The word flies out of my mouth, and my cheeks heat as he looks over his shoulder in surprise. "That is, I wouldn't mind the company. Unfamiliar place and all."

He stares into my eyes for a long moment before speaking. "I'll see you later then," he murmurs at last, voice gravelly soft.

I swallow, unable to respond for fear of saying something I'll regret.

When the door clicks shut behind him, I collapse onto the settee with a sigh to rival all other sighs. W*hat am I even doing?*

THE POCKET WATCH I find in one of the desk drawers reads half past three when footsteps sound outside the door. My heart trips over itself as I call out a breathless "come in," but it isn't the lithe figure of my husband that fills the door as it opens, but one far larger. One that would easily pass for a bear if it weren't for the work clothes and leather cap he was wearing.

I stumble back with a startled shriek, grasping the iron poker beside the fireplace and wielding it in front of me. The man, whose hands I realize are holding a steaming plate of food, pauses in the threshold.

"It's all right," he says carefully. "I'm only here to bring you some food and the clothing Monsieur Bertrand asked me to acquire. Name's Jacob."

"Jacob Bastin," I manage. "This is your house?"

“That’s right.” He eyes the poker warily, and I slowly drop it to my side. Taking that as an invitation to come in, he crosses the room and sets the plate on the desk before pulling a bundle of fabric out from under his arm. “I wasn’t able to find anything fancy at the last-minute, but they’re respectable enough for travel.”

I slide the poker back into place before accepting the proffered clothing. “Thank you. That was kind of you.”

“Think nothing of it,” the man grunts, already shuffling back toward the door. “I owe my life to your husband, and I’m not one to forget my debts.”

He starts to leave, but my curiosity is too strong. “How did he help you?” I blurt out, then hurry to add, “If you don’t mind my asking, that is.”

The man pulls off his cap and scratches the back of his head. “It was a long time ago, when I was just a tiny scrap of a boy. I was playing out in the street, not paying any mind, when a cart came flying down the road, horses out of control. They were heading straight for me when Monsieur Bertrand swooped in and knocked me out of the way. Took the brunt of the hit himself.” He shakes his head. “Would have killed an ordinary man.” He shoots me a sharp look. “But as I’m sure you know, there’s nothing ordinary about Monsieur. It’s been over thirty years since then, and he hasn’t aged a day. Curious, that.”

“Curious enough to make people ask questions, I would think.” I cock my head.

“There’ve been a few over the years,” he admits. “But the castle provides a great deal for this town, and people are a lot keener to keep their mouths shut when their stomachs are full.”

“If the town is so beholden to my husband, why is it I’m hiding in your attic?”

“We might keep our mouths shut,” Jacob says, giving me a look. “But we aren’t blind. Monsieur Bertrand might be the face people recognize, but everyone knows he’s not the one in control.” He glances in the direction of the castle with a grimace. “There’s something foul lingering in that place, and the longer it stays put, the better.”

“Something foul, indeed,” I murmur, stepping back as I allow Jacob to leave. The aroma of hot, roast chicken wafts through the air from the plate he delivered, but I find myself at a loss of appetite. Knowing Celeste continues to reign in her tower is enough to turn my stomach for good.

This morning I’d been ready to flee.

Now, I can't help but wonder if there's something I can do to help.

I'm still turning the thought over in my mind when Bertrand returns, slipping into the room with a soft knock. There's a wooden shaving kit in his hands and at my questioning look he explains, "Borrowed it from Jacob. Figured it was time."

I try to hide my surprise at this revelation. "I met Jacob earlier. He brought me some food and a change of clothes." Bertrand glances at the shirt I'm still wearing, and I tug self-consciously at the hem. "Figured I might as well keep them clean until tomorrow."

The corner of Bertrand's mouth twitches as if he wants to say something, but he clears his throat and turns his focus to arranging the box's contents along the edge of the sink. I watch as he studiously lathers his face, holding my breath as he lifts the razor to his cheek.

And freezes.

The silver blade presses lightly against his skin, but his hand doesn't move, his eyes locked on his reflection in the mirror. I can see his Adam's apple bob beneath the soapy foam, can see the way the razor trembles in his hand. The raw vulnerability wraps around my heart like a vice, and I find myself slipping behind him and wrapping my arms around his broad chest. "You are so much more than Celeste's monster, Bertrand. You're a dark knight, waiting in the wings for his chance at redemption." I press a kiss against his back, willing my conviction to reach him. "I know you'll find a way to defeat the dragon in the tower."

His breath hitches, and there's a tremor in his voice as he whispers, "What if I've known a way for years, but I was too cowardly to follow through with it?"

I squeeze a little tighter, my own throat growing thick with emotion. I want to ask what it is, want to know the cost, but in my heart, I know it doesn't matter. If it puts an end to Celeste's power, it's a cost that must be paid.

But that doesn't mean he has to pay it alone.

"Then I'd say we'd best get to it." I lift my hand, layering it over Bertrand's as I slowly guide the blade down his cheek, and for a brief

moment his eyes close as he relaxes into my touch. When they open, the fear is gone, replaced by a glimmering determination that threatens to take my breath away.

His other hand reaches up and clasps my wrist, holding it in place. “There’s no we in this, Adelaide.” He carefully moves my hand, placing it over his heart instead. The organ pounds a steady rhythm beneath my palm, loud and strong. “This is my fight. You are going to return to your family or wherever else it is you wish to go. I’ve already set up an account in your name, with enough funds for you to live comfortably the rest of your life. You’re free now, Adelaide. Take your life back and live it to its fullest. It’s what you deserve.”

It’s a generous offer, and one I should probably take. I’ve always longed for independence, for the freedom to simply be me and say to hell with everyone else and their expectations. There’s only one problem. I meet Bertrand’s gaze in the mirror as I lace our overlapping fingers together.

“What if I don’t want to be free without you?”

36

BERTRAND

She doesn't know what she's saying. Hasn't seen the path I have to take. It's one of unthinkable torment, and I'll be damned if I allow her to be tainted by even the tiniest of glimpses. No, despite her brave words and good intentions, tomorrow I will go to the castle alone, and Adelaide will begin her life anew. But tonight…

Tonight I say goodbye to the woman I love.

Adelaide tugs on my hand, and I allow her to pull me away from the sink and over to the settee. She gently pushes me down onto the worn cushions, and I don't resist when she takes the blade from my hand and lifts her finger in a silent command for me to wait. I allow my gaze to travel the length of her creamy white legs as she saunters back to the sink, drinking in each gentle sway of her hips. She takes the towel I've left folded there and tosses it over her shoulder, and I watch with hungry eyes as she makes her way back, only stopping when her legs brush mine.

She holds my gaze as she lifts one knee onto the seat beside me, then the other, straddling my lap. My hands immediately settle on her waist, desperate to hold her for as long as possible. Needing to make these final moments together last.

The razor glides across my skin with deft strokes, and I allow Adelaide to tip my head back as she curves it around my chin. Each pass is a chain being broken, and when she sets the blade aside and gently wipes the remaining lather away with the towel, it's as if I'm a new man. One who could actually do something worthy of this woman's love.

Adelaide's fingers graze my face, a tender smile gracing her lips. "Now this," she murmurs, "is a face worth showing." She leans down and her lips brush mine once, twice. I hold back as far as the third, letting her take the lead, fearing the moment will end before it's even begun.

But then her hips roll, and I'm undone.

I mold my lips to hers, savoring the feel of her tongue as I plunder her mouth. Grasping the hem of her shirt, I draw it upward, and she releases her hold on the back of my neck as she lifts her arms, allowing me to remove it completely. The action leaves two perfectly rounded breasts mouthwateringly close to my face, their rigid peaks begging for attention.

I oblige.

Her gasp of pleasure as I draw each of those sensitive pink tips into my mouth goes straight to my groin, and I press the aching length upward, eliciting even more delightful noises from the angel in my lap. She tears at my shirt, and I release her breast with a soft pop as I help her shed the borrowed garment. There's a fierceness in her eyes as she looks down at me, intense and commanding. It pins me to the cushions as she reaches between us and snaps the buttons of my pants, and it blazes to an almost incinerating heat when she grips me.

"Tell me you're mine," she breathes, fingers twisting along my member.

A groan rumbles through my chest.

She squeezes harder. "Say it."

"I'm yours," I gasp, bucking upward.

"That's right." She presses her palm to my stomach, holding me in place as she slides off my lap and places herself between my knees. "From now on, the only thrall you're allowed to fall under is mine."

Her lips wrap around my cock, and my head tips back as she draws me all the way in. There's no teasing, no coy little licks, just relentless pleasure that sends me hurtling toward the edge far too soon. My fingers tangle in her hair as I gasp her name, pleading. "Adelaide."

Her mouth slips free as she looks up, only for her hands to take over where her tongue left off. I bow forward as the pleasure builds to a precipice, knowing I'm moments away from exploding. "Adelaide, please."

"You want control?" she challenges, eyes flashing as her lips curve into a smirk. "Then take it."

My chest tightens as I remain locked in place. Adelaide's face blurs, replaced by another that sneers up at me in disdain, her hand twisting my

beard. *You think I don't know what you've been doing? Playing the dutiful pet to all the villagers in that nasty little town. It won't matter, husband. You're rotten inside, just like me, and there's nothing you can do to change that.*

The memory shatters, broken by the smack of flesh against my cheek. Adelaide's face reappears in all of its furious glory, her bladed hand falling to her side as she stands and shoves me back into the settee with her foot.

"Don't you dare let her in," she snaps. "Not for one bloody second. You're *mine*." Her lip quivers, her voice softening. "As I am yours."

Mine.

This amazingly fierce woman is *mine*. Not because of pretty lies or some twisted compulsion but by *choice*. She knows what I am, yet she's still standing here, giving herself to me freely. Why am I not already worshiping her?

I wrap my fingers around her ankle, and she emits a soft yelp as I stand and slide her over my shoulder in one fluid movement. A few long strides and I'm tossing her onto the bed, a satisfied grin slanting my mouth as she bounces. Her cheeks are flushed and there's a gleam of anticipation in her eyes as she gazes up at me, waiting.

She doesn't need to wait long before I'm tugging the white, ruffled drawers down her thighs and tossing them to the side as I settle between her legs. I grasp the underside of her knee, lifting her leg as I trail languid kisses across her silky skin. Her hips arch upward as if attempting to close the distance between her dripping center and my eager mouth.

Again, I oblige.

I lap at her glistening bud like a man dying of thirst, and in reality, I am just that. I'm desperate to claim these few, precious moments—the last moments of true pleasure I'll ever experience. An eternity of madness hangs over my head, and so I burn the sound of Adelaide's rising moans into my memory, finger crooking inside her delicious heat until it presses just the right spot to bring her to a crescendo.

When her voice cracks and she calls out my name, I prowl into place above her and watch the stars burst in her eyes as I thrust inside. I hold her gaze as I drive deeper, soaking in every ounce of pleasure reflected there until my own release overwhelms us both. As the tide ebbs, and I'm left breathless and panting, I whisper the words that have been haunting me since the day we wed.

“I’m sorry, Adelaide. I’m so terribly sorry.”

A glassy sheen coats her eyes as she gazes up at me, and she lifts a hand to cup my newly-smooth cheek. “I know.” Her thumb whisks away a tear I hadn’t realized I’d shed, and my wasted heart beats anew as she adds, “I forgive you.”

I LINGER AS LONG as I dare, listening to her sigh as sleep draws her into its gentle embrace. I’d watch her all night if I could, but the hour grows late and I can’t risk her discovering the details of my plan. That she’s willing to stand by me is boon enough. The actual act must be done alone.

A pair of silvery eyes cut through the darkness as I peel the rug back and open the floorboards to retrieve the necessary tools. Whisper slinks across the room and sits beside me with an accusatory glare as I thumb through the battered journal, its pages yellowed with age. When I find the passage I need, I carefully tear the parchment free and fold it into my pocket. “I’m doing this for her,” I whisper. “It’s the only way she’ll truly be safe. The only way to keep *everyone* safe.”

Whisper lets out a plaintive mew, and bumps her head against my knee. The gesture is surprisingly loving, and I feel my throat grow thick with emotion. “I have to do this.” I spare a moment to scratch behind the feline’s ghostly ears. “No one else deserves to suffer for my cowardice.” Grabbing the pot of ink and engraved paintbrush I acquired along with the journal, I hurry to replace the floorboard and reposition the rug before slipping soundlessly out of the room. Thankfully, Whisper remains inside.

I tap on Jacob’s door, and it swings open almost immediately. The other man’s expression is grim as he meets my gaze.

“You sure you want to go through with this?”

I push the ink and brush into his hands before settling on the wooden stool he’s set out in preparation. Pulling the folded parchment from my pocket, I hand it to him with a curt, “I’m sure.”

He nods, accepting it without argument. Dipping the brush into the ink, he sets to work painting the required runes along my back and arms, stopping every so often to match them against the ones displayed on the paper. When he’s finished, he walks me to the door in solemn silence.

“You’ll see that she gets in the carriage to Calais?” I ask, turning to face him on the front steps. “You won’t let her follow me?”

“Aye, I’ll make sure of it.”

I nod. “Once she’s safely on her way, I’ll need you to double back and head to the shoreline outside the castle. There’s a young woman I’ll be bringing out who’ll need a place to stay and help making a fresh start of things.” I pull a pouch full of coins from my pocket and place it in his hands. “This should help. See that she gets it.”

“I will.”

I clamp a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Thank you, Jacob. You’re a good friend to do all this.”

He clears his throat. “I wouldn’t be standing here if it weren’t for you, so I guess that makes us even.”

I summon a crooked smile, even as my gaze wanders upward toward the attic, longing for one last look at my sleeping wife. “Don’t let her go back there, Jacob. No matter how many years have passed or what rumors you hear, she’s not to set foot there again. Promise me.”

He lifts his own hand to grip my shoulder. “I’ll see to my task, Monsieur. Now you see to yours.”

We part on a final nod, and I turn, facing the road back home. *Goodbye, Adelaide. I pray you find a better end than I.*

37

ADELAIDE

I sense something's off before I'm fully awake. The air is cold, and filled with an urgency so thick I can almost taste it. When I lift my lids, my gaze is met with a pair of silvery eyes peering down at me from above. "Whisper?" I scoop the cat off my chest as I sit up. A sliver of foreboding works its way up my spine as I take in the empty space beside me. "Where's Bertrand?"

Whisper looks toward the door.

My heart drops. "He went back, didn't he?"

A soft meow, a gentle paw to my cheek.

"To what end? If he kills Celeste, he won't be able to feed from her, and I know he fears growing feral. But if he doesn't kill her, she'll continue to use him, and I refuse to believe he wants that. So, what else does that leave him?" Nothing. And yet, he wouldn't have left without a plan. "Dash it, Bertrand. After everything we've been through, you still couldn't confide in me?" Anger burns bright in my chest, and I throw the covers aside with a frustrated growl. "Typical man. Always thinking he has to do everything on his own. Heaven forbid he ask for help."

Whisper wiggles free of my grip and drops to the floor, her head nudging beneath the edge of the braided rug as she mews. Given the effort it takes for her to move physical objects, I quickly drop to my knees and peel the rug back. "What is it, Whisp? Something you want to show me?" The feline scratches at the floor, and I wrinkle my brow in confusion. "I don't understand."

Her claw catches in a crack between the floorboards, causing one of them to rattle. “A loose board?” My pulse kicks up as I reach for it, tripping into a full-on gallop when the board lifts free, revealing a hidden space. “Now, what do we have here?” I pull out a leather-bound book, its pages tattered and yellowed with age. There’s an intricate, knotted symbol on the cover, and as I thumb through the pages it becomes rapidly clear that I’m holding some sort of spell book. My fingers still as I reach a page that’s been mostly torn out. The only thing left on the remaining scrap are the words *Ritual of Eternal Binding*.

I gasp. “This must be the journal Bertrand tracked down, the one belonging to the coven.” And the page that’s been removed must have outlined the binding process the witches used on Celeste. “But why take it out?” I turn the journal over in my hands. “She’s already been bound to the tower, and even if Bertrand could follow through with the coven’s original plan of burying her alive, it would still leave him without access to her blood. There’d be nothing stopping him from running rampant through the town once his restraint ran down.”

He wouldn’t chance it.

“He said he knew a way to stop her, one he’d been too afraid to follow through on before now.” I absentmindedly rub Whisper’s fur as she paces back and forth beside me. For all that she seemed to dislike him upon first meeting, she appears almost as anxious as I am now. She knows something, but what? “If only you could talk, you could tell me what foolhardy plan my husband’s bound himself to…”

My heart stutters at a sudden thought.

“Oh! Oh no. He wouldn’t. He *couldn’t*.”

I pick Whisper up and hold her in front of my face so that we’re nose-to-nose. “Please tell me my fool of a husband isn’t planning to bind *himself*.” The answering mew is solemn, Whisper’s eyes a pair of sympathetic pools. I can only assume that’s a yes.

“That *idiot*.”

I all but strangle myself with the dress Jacob delivered yesterday, swearing as I fumble with my new underthings and shoes. I’m still pulling the second boot on as I throw open the door, and I come precariously close to falling down the stairs in my haste. I would have at least had a soft landing, for Jacob’s broad figure appears at the bottom before I’m scarcely two steps down.

“Good, you’re awake. Monsieur Bertrand asked me to escort you to the carriage house this morning in his place, as he’s trying to keep a low profile in town.” He glances nervously over my shoulder. “Don’t suppose you have any luggage to take with you?” He moves to the side as I reach the bottom of the stairwell but remains hovering next to me as if afraid I’ll make a run for it.

Suspicious.

His gaze stays fixed on the wall, refusing to meet mine.

Extremely suspicious.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” I give him my sweetest smile. I consider batting my lashes but decide that might be over the top. “I left it on the bed. Would you be a dear and fetch it for me?”

Jacob scratches the back of his head as he looks between me and the stairs. Chivalry wins out, and he bobs a quick nod. “Wait here, and I’ll show you to the kitchen for a bite to eat after I grab it. Wouldn’t want you starting off on an empty stomach.”

This time, my smile is sincere. “Thank you. That’s very considerate.”

His cheeks take on a ruddy hue, and he waves my gratitude away as he lumbers up the steps. “No trouble at all.” I wait until he reaches the top, holding my breath as he opens the door and steps inside the attic room. His heavy footsteps vibrate through the ceiling. When they stop, I run.

I fly down the staircase to the bottom floor on tiptoes, moving as soundlessly as I can, but it isn’t long before I hear Jacob’s tread pounding down after me. I’m out the front door and streaking across the lawn toward the dirt road by the time I hear him calling my name. The sound of his deep voice has my feet picking up speed, but my efforts are in vain—I’m surrounded by open fields lined with thick, bramble-filled hedges. Not to mention I have no idea which direction I should even be running in. By the time Jacob hitches a horse to his wagon and rolls up behind me, I’ve already slowed to a walk, shoulders slumped in defeat.

Jacob’s expression is sympathetic as he hops down and offers me a hand. “Castle’s over three miles down that way, and Monsieur Bertrand left hours ago. Chasing after him now won’t do you any good. Besides, he was insistent you head straight for Calais. Said it wasn’t safe for you here, and I have to agree.” His rough hand envelopes mine with a surprising gentleness. “He’s made up his mind, Madame. The least we can do is respect his decision.”

“I suppose you’re right.” My gaze flicks to the ball of translucent white fur perched atop the wagon wheel. Summoning a resigned sigh, I allow Jacob to help me up. “Thank you, Jacob, and my apologies.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” he replies, adjusting his leather cap.

“On the contrary”—my booted foot slams into his chest as Whisper leaps onto his shoulder with a flash of claws—“there is.” He stumbles back with a shout, and I waste no time grabbing the reins and giving them a sharp crack. The horse takes off immediately, and I silently thank my brother Tristan for succumbing to my incessant pleas to teach me how to drive his phaeton. The wagon isn’t as fast, but the mechanics appear to be much the same. With a little urging, it isn’t long before Jacob fades into the distance, and I’m headed to the one place I never wished to see again.

What’s the plan, Adelaide? I grip the reins tightly as the wagon rolls ever closer to its destination. *You want to save Bertrand—how are you going to manage it?* If I arrive without a course of action, I’m more likely to be a hindrance than a help. And I desperately wish to help him.

I love him.

I shake my head. What does that say about me? That I could love someone who never ages and consumes blood to stay alive. It’s unnatural.

Then again, I talk to ghosts.

Ghosts.

My eyes widen.

The ghosts of Bertrand’s past wives—what had that freckled one said before Louise interrupted us in the library? That they needed my assistance with something to stop Celeste?

I slap the reins, letting out a deep “ya” as I urge the horse into a gallop.

It’s time to put this ability of mine to use.

38

BERTRAND

The castle grounds are eerily quiet, with a thick layer of fog hovering over the mossy lawn as I row in a wide arc around the peninsula and climb the west bank. The narrow strip that connects the castle to the mainland is clear, the tide low enough to approach the castle on foot, but I suspect that path is being watched.

Celeste cannot be allowed any advantage.

I slip in through a side door, the closest one to the dungeons. The dank cells stretch beneath the North Tower, making it the ideal location for my grand finale. There's no sign of Edgar or Griffon as I trespass through the halls and down the winding staircase, and I find Louise's blood-drained corpse lying on the stone floor where I left her, a swarm of flies busily laying their eggs in the decaying flesh. Remorse pierces my gut as I witness the evidence of my enraged frenzy. She didn't deserve to die like that. Now she'll be buried alongside me with the rest of my wicked deeds.

The barrel strapped to my back weighs heavier at the thought.

A late-night visit to a man of questionable means and even more questionable connections has supplied me with a sizable amount of gunpowder. Originally intended for a nearby coal mine, the explosive substance will now serve a greater purpose—the destruction of this wretched castle and the monsters that dwell inside it. I lace the dungeons with it, ensuring the foundation beneath the tower will be thoroughly shaken when it goes off. I need Celeste to be trapped beneath the rubble as well. Bound to our shared grave for eternity. I have one loose end to attend

to, however, before I strike the match and bring this castle to ruin—the freeing of Miss Emily Garnier from Celeste's tower.

I'll have to go up there. Celeste will no doubt be keeping the girl close in the wake of my and Adelaide's departure. The others were often allowed to wander the castle, entrenched enough in Celeste's control not to have any thought of leaving. But that won't be the case now. Miss Garnier will be at Celeste's side, and I'll have no choice but to face my progenitor firsthand.

You're stronger than her, physically. If you can avoid her eyes and resist the lure of her thrall, there's no reason you can't march up there and take the girl.

If I can resist.

If I fail…

No. It isn't to be thought of. If I let my mind wander there, the resulting dread will only weaken my defenses. I can do this. I'm in control.

I repeat the phrase like a mantra as I make my way into the castle proper. No sign of Edgar skulking about. Perhaps the sight of Ricard's lifeless body in the foyer pushed him over the edge, and he's fled. For his sake, I pray that he has.

My feet grow heavier with every step I take, each one a labor of determination. I think of Adelaide, of Emily, of all of my past wives, and press onward. I'm doing this for them. For Constance and my parents, whose home has been desecrated in their absence. I clutch the tower key in my fist.

I'm doing this for me, so that I might finally be free.

A sense of calm washes over me as I reach the tower door, and the tiniest of smiles pulls at my lips as I slide the key into place. Soon. Soon this will all be over. The lock clicks, and I open the door to the stairwell.

My previous wives await, their wraithlike faces pressing through the stone walls as they watch me ascend. For once, they remain quiet, as if they know my intentions and are waiting to see how it will end. I meet each of their accusing gazes as I pass, speaking their names in my mind: Genevieve, Catherine, Anne, Margaret, Cressida. Innocent casualties in Celeste's and my game. They deserved better, and while I can't give them back their lives, I can at least offer the rest of mine. May it bring them peace at last.

I steel myself for the final bend, lowering my gaze lest I meet Celeste's eyes upon entering the room. The gauzy black fabric of her dress brushes

the floor in front of the window where she stands, and I quickly glance around to find Miss Garnier sitting in the chair beside the bed. I move to grab her, but Celeste's silky voice slows my traitorous limbs as I stumble forward.

"Eh eh eh. No stealing my new dolly."

Don't listen to her. Just take the girl and go.

"It's not my fault you've lost your own."

Move, damn it.

"Your pretty bride doll with all that shiny black hair…"

My fingers curl into fists. *Don't you dare speak her name with your poisonous tongue.*

"…she's probably on her way to Calais right now. Or she would be"—she giggles—"if I hadn't arranged for Griffon to be her carriage driver. Edgar's helping too. Such good little soldiers. Unlike you."

She's lying. Adelaide is with Jacob, she's safe. I propel myself forward, lunging at Miss Garnier and grabbing her wrist. The poor woman is so deep under Celeste's thrall, she doesn't even blink as I jerk her out of her seat. "Shift's over, Miss Garnier. Time to go."

Celeste doesn't lift a finger to stop me as I drag the woman toward the door, but her sing-song taunts halt me in my tracks. "Or perhaps she never boarded the carriage at all. Such a stubborn dolly—perhaps she's decided to come back all on her own. Perhaps she's here already, scampering across the pass like a wild-eyed creature of the forest, attempting to avoid the hunter's barrel." Her tinkling laughter ices my veins. "Poor little dolly. Doesn't she know she's headed straight for the fox's den?"

I refuse to believe Adelaide is here. It's a trick—a game concocted for Celeste's amusement. And yet…I turn my head to the window and look.

Straight into Celeste's glowing eyes.

39

ADELAIDE

I've never considered myself to be special. The abilities I was born with weren't something to be admired or envied but rather something I was supposed to keep hidden from the eyes of society. If people knew what I could do, I'd be considered scandalous. Shameful. An attention-seeking liar at best. So, with the exception of family who truly *should* have accepted me, I hid them. That is, until a mysterious man with a stunning blue beard smiled at me from the dwindling light of Sister Mercy's departing soul, and I knew with unshakeable certainty that I'd found a kindred spirit.

Someone who loved me for who I was, abilities and all.

Now, with Jacob's horse hitched to the post behind me and my boots sinking into the sandy pass leading up to the castle, the time has finally come for me to embrace the gifts I've hidden. It's time to call upon the ghosts.

I only hope they're willing to listen.

My legs tremble as I climb the stone steps, the blood loss I suffered at Celeste's fangs stripping me of my usual strength. The wind beats against my face while a storm brews overhead, a cluster of dark clouds drawing together as if summoned by the blood witch herself. I glare up at the tower, shielding my eyes against the sudden prick of rain, and I swear I see a flash of red light emanating from her window.

I shudder as I drop my gaze. "If you're here, Whisper, I could use a friend."

The brush of cool fur against my cheek loosens the knot of anxiety in my chest, and I breathe easier feeling the slight weight on my shoulder. Whisper's tail wraps around the back of my neck in a gentle caress as I press onward. For better or worse, at least I'm not alone.

My determination wavers as I approach the castle door. The memory of blood-streaked walls and a pair of glowing red eyes lock my feet in place, and no matter how hard I try, my arm refuses to lift.

Steady, Adelaide. You can do this.

I push the heavy door open.

"H-hello?" I take a tentative step inside, braced to defend myself should one of Celeste's lackeys be skulking about, waiting to ambush me and drag me to the tower, but the foyer is empty save for a few cobwebs and the maggot-riddled body of Bertrand's valet splayed before the entrance. Bile stings the back of my throat and I clutch my stomach as vomit spews across the floor.

"Oh god, the smell—"

I cover my nose and mouth as I stumble forward, skirting the putrid remains as best I can. When I'm far enough to breathe without retching, I wipe my mouth and straighten my shoulders. I suppose I should have felt something more than disgust at the sight of Ricard's corpse. Sympathy, perhaps.

But all I can think is *good riddance*.

Peering into the shadows, I search for a hint of movement. Some sign that the ghosts are near. When I see none, I summon all of my daring and call out.

"My fellow wives, I beseech you. Show yourselves to me so that we can join together in our revenge." I turn in a slow circle. "Help me end the blood witch's reign."

There's a beat of silence, then darkness as the chandelier dangling overhead stutters out.

A softly glowing figure appears.

Tall and stern-faced, with spectacles that slip to the tip of her nose and a brown muslin dress buttoned all the way up her neck, the woman hovering before me is little more than a wisp. "We've been waiting for you, Adelaide Brindamour," she says, holding her hands out to either side. A shimmer of light breaks the surrounding darkness, and I can't help but gasp as four additional figures appear, skin glowing in much the same way.

“You’re Bertrand’s wives,” I whisper, taking them in with round eyes. It doesn’t matter that I called them here, that I knew of their existence. Seeing them gathered like this is still a punch to the gut. *Oh, Bertrand. The things you’ve done.*

The woman in brown tilts her head. “Something we have in common.” Her brow lifts. “The singular thing we have in common, it would seem. You are the only one he took for himself. The only one he set free.”

A flush of guilt warms my cheeks. “I’m sorry for what happened to you all. Truly, I am.” It’s on the tip of my tongue to advocate for Bertrand. To tell them he’s changed. But these women have suffered far too much for such simple words. They deserve justice.

“You have not gone entirely unscathed, yourself,” the woman replies, her gaze dropping to my neck. “You are well aware of what lurks in the tower, and yet here you are. Tell me, Miss Brindamour. Why have you returned to this god forsaken place?”

I lift my chin, mustering as much confidence as I can manage. “It’s Madame de Montragoux, and I’ve returned to save my husband. Although”—my voice wavers—“I’m hoping you know how.”

The woman’s mouth curves into a satisfied smile. “Well then, you’re in luck. Because it just so happens we do.”

The other wives smile, and one of them steps forward, her blonde ringlets framing a translucent face. “We have not been lingering here for the sole purpose of tormenting Bertrand. Though, I’ll admit we tend to get carried away in our theatrics at times. There’s little in the way of entertainment when one is stuck in the in-between.”

I recall the mournful wailing that echoed through the castle the night I arrived. *It was all a performance. But…* “Why then?”

The wives exchange loaded glances.

“Observation,” the blonde says.

“Experimentation,” another adds, her freckled face creasing in a knowing smirk.

A flutter of excitement sets my heart to pounding. “Experimenting with what, pray tell?”

The woman in brown raises her hand and twists her wrist with a flourish. A glowing chain appears in the air, its linked rings clinking together as it falls lightly into the palm of her hand. She grins. “Smithing.”

I can't tear my gaze away from the shimmering length of metal. It's like nothing I've ever seen. "You made this?" I breathe.

"It wasn't easy," the woman in brown replies, "but between the five of us we finally created one powerful enough to render even the strongest monster helpless when properly bound."

"You made this for Bertrand," I whisper, a pang of fear lancing my breast. "To keep him from doing Celeste's bidding." *Is that really the only option?*

"That was our original intention," the woman in brown concedes. "But your arrival has provided another option. Assuming you're willing to risk everything for the man you love?"

A chance to save Bertrand. "Tell me what you need me to do."

The woman in brown whisks the ethereal chain away with a flick of her hand, a challenge lighting her eyes. "You must enter the tower."

THE GHOSTS OUTLINE their plan in hushed whispers, and anxiety grips my chest with each word. It's an impossible feat that they're asking. I'm certain to fail.

Still, I have to try.

"We'll be with you the entire time," the blonde—Anne, she said her name was—assures me. "For all of Celeste's power, she lacks the sight that you and Bertrand possess. To her, we are nothing more than a trick of light or shadows lurking in her periphery."

"And remember—whatever you do, do *not* look her in the eyes," the freckled one—Cressida—adds. "That's how she snares her prey."

I nod, rubbing my hands together as I gather every shred of courage I can find. *I can do this. For these women, whose lives were wasted. For Bertrand, who would endure an eternity of torment to make amends.* I square my shoulders as I face the stairs. *For myself, and every time someone tried to make me feel ashamed of being different, when it's that very difference that allowed me to reach out to these women in the first place.*

"You should know, however"—Anne's gaze darts toward the ceiling—"that Bertrand's attempt to free the young woman ended poorly. Celeste

tricked him into—”

A deep voice rumbles from the top of the steps, interrupting her warning, and a shiver trills up my spine at its familiar tone. Familiar, and yet—not.

“Adelaide. You came.”

I lift my head, meeting Bertrand’s gaze as he looks down from the mezzanine. His lips are curved in a smile that feels utterly wrong. He should be furious seeing me here after he went to such great lengths to send me home. He certainly shouldn’t be smiling. And his eyes… even at a distance, I can see they’re nothing but vacant pools. I don’t need to hear the rest of Anne’s warning to know he’s under Celeste’s thrall.

“Yes, Bertrand.” I force myself to smile as he moves, slinking down the stairs like a panther. “I’m here.”

“That’s wonderful, darling.” He extends his hand. “You’re just in time for my surprise.”

My hand trembles as I reach for him, and it’s a sheer force of will for me to slip it into his. “A surprise? How lovely.”

“Not as lovely as you, my darling.” He pulls me against his chest, and I swallow a sob as his lips graze my forehead. This isn’t my Bertrand.

But he’s in there somewhere.

I allow my hand to be tucked into the crook of his arm, falling in step beside him as he guides us up the stairs.

I will find you, my love.

Down the hall and up another set of stairs, until the tower looms before us. The blood-stained key clicks in the lock, and the door creaks open to reveal a row of ghostly faces watching in silent support. I take a breath and plunge into the darkness.

I will find you, and I will set you free.

40

ADELAIDE

"The runaway bride, home at last." Celeste's voice wraps around my neck like a noose as I step into the tower room, the cloying edge cinching it tight.

I can't breathe.

I can't think.

What am I even doing here? I had a purpose, did I not? But what…

Bertrand's hand brushes my lower back, ushering me further into the room. That's right, he had a surprise for me. My gaze begins to lift when a shimmer of white passes in front of me, blocking my view.

"Keep your head down, Adelaide," a voice whispers in my ear. "Don't let her draw you in."

Genevieve's voice—the wives! I shake the fog from my mind as clarity returns. That's right, I have a mission to attend to. I keep my gaze lowered as I search out the edge of the bed—there! A wrought iron frame with sharply pointed bedposts, just as the wives said. And the one on the left at the foot, if their combined efforts have paid off, should be loose enough to break free if I pull hard enough. One good tug, then straight through Celeste's heart.

I can do this.

Maybe.

Don't think, just do.

Celeste says something else, but I'm not listening. All of my focus is on that bedpost-turned-makeshift-spear, and I lunge forward, grabbing the iron

rod and pulling as hard as I can. The metal bends, twisting away from the rest of the frame. And then stops. Panicked, I throw my weight behind it, desperately jerking it to the side, but Bertrand's hand is already gripping my arm, Celeste's laughter filling the room. A sob claws its way up my throat as Bertrand forces my hand free of the bed frame.

"What a naughty little dolly, you are," Celeste purrs, and I tense as I hear her approach. I keep my gaze fixed firmly on the floor, and when her icy fingers wrap around my chin and tilt my face upward, I squeeze my eyes shut. I may very well die here, but I refuse to let her control me. Not again.

"Don't be shy, love." Her thumb strokes my skin. "It'll all be so much more pleasant if you simply let me in. Otherwise, I'm afraid things might get a bit… painful."

I grit my teeth. "Go to hell."

The smack of Celeste's hand whips my head to the side. It leaves my cheek with a blistering sting, but at least she's released my chin. Bertrand's grip on my arm tightens, and I can feel his heart pounding as he takes a step closer, his chest flush against my back.

"Bad dolly." Celeste frowns. "Now I'm going to have to make your beloved Bertrand drain you himself. Just think how devastated he'll be when he realizes." Her giggle scrapes at my raw nerves, and I drive my leg up, slamming my knee into her gut. The resulting screech brings a smile to my face, and I kick my leg out again, my booted heel grazing her side.

"Do it, husband," she shrieks. "Suck every last drop of the bitch's blood."

"Yes, my love," Bertrand intones, his voice devoid of emotion. I tense as his lips brush my neck, the tips of his fangs pressing against my skin.

"You don't want to do this, Bertrand," I whisper. "You love me—" My words morph into a cry of pain as his teeth break the surface. "Bertrand, please…" My voice cracks as I feel him drawing blood, consuming what little I have left. He's too deep under Celeste's thrall to hear me. This is the end. I'm going to die in this cursed tower, and Bertrand will remain enslaved for eternity. Celeste will not allow him to slip away again.

Something warm drips onto my neck and runs down my breast. I raise my trembling hand and wipe a finger through the wet trail. It doesn't feel like blood. It's almost like…tears?

Bertrand is crying.

And I'm just standing here, letting him.

No more.

I grasp the back of his head, clutching his thick hair as I level him with my most commanding tone. "Enough, Bertrand. You're not to listen to her anymore, do you hear me? You belong to me. Your Adelaide. Your *wife*."

The pull of blood slows, Bertrand's hold on my arm loosening, but it tightens at the sound of Celeste's voice. "Drain the insolent doll. I demand it."

"Damn it, Bertrand." I tug at his hair, but my strength is dwindling along with the blood loss. So much loss in such a short amount of time, I can barely stand. My voice is little more than a whimper. "Don't listen to her."

"He can't hear you," Celeste sings. "He can only hear—"

Her words are lost in a howl of pain, and a feline hisses somewhere in the background. White light radiates through the back of my eyelids, and I dare to crack one open enough to see a wall of ghostly figures standing between us and Celeste.

"Hurry, Adelaide," Anne says as she links shimmering arms with two of the other wives. "We won't be able to block her out for long."

I draw up every ounce of energy left in my body and use it to extricate Bertrand's hand from my arm. Lacing my fingers through his, I lift them to my lips. "Please, Bertrand. I need you to come back to me." My voice wavers as the edges of the room turn black, the ceiling spinning as my eyes roll heavenward. "You're stronger than this, Bertrand. You're…" My voice trails off as my hand falls to my side, and I slump into his chest. My eyes flutter closed.

I almost miss the moment his mouth retreats, his arms slipping around my waist to hold me up rather than hold me back. But the sound of his voice as he gasps my name is as clear as a summer's day.

"Adelaide."

41

BERTRAND

What have I done? Adelaide, she… she's…

A sigh slips through her pale lips. It's soft, barely more than a whisper, but it fills me with a fire so fierce it scorches my insides. I may have done this, but it was the viper at my back who gave the order. My penance can wait.

A flurry of white surrounds me, and five pairs of ghostly arms reach for Adelaide. I tighten my hold as I glare at them. "Your vendetta is with me, not her. She's innocent."

"Foolish man," Genevieve scoffs, glasses slipping perilously low despite her spectral form. "You think we don't know who pulls your strings? If you desire forgiveness, then I suggest you release Adelaide to us and skewer that devil wife of yours to the wall."

"Celeste is not my wife," I snap, but the slight stirring of limbs draws my attention to Adelaide's face. Relief floods my veins when I see her open eyes.

"The bed," she rasps, pointing listlessly to the side. I follow her gesture and spy the mangled iron post sticking oddly out to the side of the bed. No, not a post—a spear.

I meet Genevieve's eyes. "Take care of my bride."

She nods, her wispy arms already wrapping around Adelaide's drooping form. The other wives join in, combining their strength in an effort to keep her upright. Anne tosses her blonde ringlets to the side as she levels me with a glare. "Straight through the heart. We'll do the rest."

I relinquish my hold on Adelaide and snatch the iron post with one hand as I whirl to face Celeste, whose outraged screeches cease as the wives whisk Adelaide out of the way. They're replaced by a bloodthirsty snarl as she stares me down—a lioness on the verge of pouncing.

A single twist, and the post wrenches free of the bed frame, the metal cool against my palm as I stare my tormenter down. Her crimson eyes flare bright, but it has all the effect of a parlor trick. The only one with a hold over me now is Adelaide.

I can see the surprise creep into Celeste's expression as I take a step toward her. It bleeds into fear as her gaze drops to my hand and the weapon it's clutching. She stumbles back as I prowl forward, a grin spreading across my face.

"You can't kill me with that," she hisses, coming to a stop as her back hits the wall.

"Is that so?" I raise the iron spear, aiming the tip at her heart. "I suppose we'll find out soon enough." I thrust it forward, but it stops an inch from her chest as Celeste's fist clamps down around it.

"Destroy me, and you'll never drink my blood again," she warns, her voice taking on a frenzied edge. "You'll go mad with thirst, and it won't be just your precious bride who suffers. The entire village will mourn the devastation you rain down on them."

I think of the runes inked across my skin with grim satisfaction. "Not if I can't leave." I lean into the spear, and the tip pierces her skin.

Outrage flares in her eyes, and her mouth warps into a snarling visage of teeth and fangs. "You think you're stronger than me? Fool! I'm more powerful than any creature alive." Her knuckles whiten as she pushes back, inching the spear away from her heart. "I am—"

Her voice breaks off with a startled cry as Adelaide—my relentlessly, wonderfully stubborn angel of a wife—appears at her side and smashes a teapot over her head. The pitcher bursts into shards of porcelain that slice ribbons across Celeste's face until she's a mess of oozing blue streaks.

I renew my efforts, taking advantage of her distraction as I press the spear forward.

A scream fills the tower, and the spear is yanked from my hand as I go sprawling back onto the floor. Celeste's white hair is blown out in a gravity-defying halo around her head, her body rising up so that only the tips of her toes brush the floor. When she speaks, her voice is a booming baritone.

“I am Celestula, born of witch and vampyre blood. No magic nor mortal can keep me from what I desire.”

Her head snaps to the right, and she holds out a hand. I surge to my feet with a roar as Adelaide flies into her grasp. She kicks at Celeste’s legs and claws at her face, fingers slipping through rivulets of blue blood, and I charge forward, barreling into Celeste’s chest with my shoulder.

Adelaide falls to the floor as Celeste releases her, and Celeste wraps her hands around my neck, instead, squeezing with inhuman strength.

“You can’t kill me like that,” I wheeze, gripping her wrists as I attempt to loosen her hold.

“I don’t kill naughty toys,” Celeste taunts. “I break them into tiny pieces and paste them back together. Over and over until they’ve learned their lesson.” Her fingers dig into my flesh. “Have you learned your lesson, husband? If you have, I’ll let you eat some cake.”

A shadow looms over Celeste’s shoulder, and a gush of blue blood showers the room as the tip of the wrought-iron spear bursts through her chest. Adelaide plants a foot on Celeste’s back as she falls to the floor, her entire body shaking as she wipes a sapphire streak from her mouth.

“He’s not your husband.” Her gaze drifts upward, and my heart bursts into flames from the heat of it. Her lips curve into a feral grin. “He’s mine.”

“Adelaide.” I take a step forward, only to be brushed to the side by my dead wives, whose hands are full of some sort of translucent chain. They wrap it around Celeste’s body.

“These will hold Celeste until the end of time,” Genevieve explains, “but her constitution will keep her from dying and being reborn. Her reign of terror is over.” She looks at me and nods. “Consider your debt repaid.”

“Thank you, Genevieve.” I swallow as I look past her to the others. “All of you.”

Their expressions are solemn as they nod in return. Joining hands, they lift their faces to the ceiling and close their eyes as a beam of glittering gold light surrounds them. It reminds me of a day not that long ago when I watched Sister Mercy depart the abbey ruins.

The day I first fell in love with Adelaide.

I drink in the sight of her, the way her blood-soaked figure trembles with fatigue. And yet the look on her face is fiercer than any I’ve ever seen. My glorious angel of night.

Eternity is going to be torture without her.

I take a silent step forward and pull her into my arms. Memorizing the feel of her before I say goodbye and bind myself to this place forever.

Adelaide grips the front of my shirt. “Bertrand, I…”

“What is it, love?” I run my hands up and down her arms, hoping to stir some warmth in them. She needs to eat and drink soon. She’s lost far too much blood for my liking.

She looks up at me, biting her lip. “I think I may have…”

My heart stops at the sight of blue-stained teeth.

No. Dear god, no. Don’t say it.

“…swallowed some of Celeste’s blood.”

Ten simple words and my carefully laid plans are shattered. Because there’s no future in which I’m willing to trap Adelaide in this tower alongside me. “We’ll figure something out,” I assure her, even as my mind scrambles for an answer. For a way out of this disastrous predicament. *We could let the monsters roam free. Seek out evil doers and feed off their blood. Perhaps together, we’d have more control. Perhaps…*

“Bertrand.”

Adelaide’s voice breaks through my frantic thoughts, and I find her watching me with a hint of fond amusement. Her grin widens at my befuddlement.

“I already know exactly what to do.”

EPILOGUE

ADELAIDE

The castle is abuzz with activity as servants flutter about, putting last minute touches on the rooms and making sure the newly-installed electric lights are glowing cheerily in every corridor. I can already see the first of our guests arriving at the bottom of the hill, and I hurry outside to greet them as they climb the steps.

"Marguerite! You came!" I fly into my sister's arms. "I missed you so much."

She returns my embrace, her voice wobbly as she whispers, "Don't you ever run off like that again, do you hear? I was worried half to death."

I produce a look of contrition as I finally pull away. "I'm sorry, Margie. Truly."

"I hope you've prepared one of those apologies for me," Julien interjects, his voice gruff with emotion. I allow myself to be pulled into his arms for a brisk, yet surprisingly tight, hug.

"Of course, brother." I grimace. "I do hope the scandal didn't hurt your business too terribly much?"

He clears his throat, fingers adjusting his already impeccable necktie. "It survived. Although I've likely shaved a few years off my life from the stress of it all."

"Don't listen to him, Addie." Tristan appears at the top of the steps, grinning broadly. "Business has been booming ever since we acquired an anonymous new investor." He gives me a pointed look. "Anyone you know?"

I smirk, giving him a little shrug. "It's news to me."

“I bet.” With a laugh, he scoops me off the ground and whirls me around in a circle. “Missed you, little sis.”

“I’m not sure we can call her little sis anymore,” Darren chimes in as he appears on my other side. “Haven’t you heard? She’s the infamous Madame de Montragoux. Beloved benefactress of the poor and rising radical in the advocation of women’s rights.”

“A bluestocking with hair to match,” Tristan teases, tilting his head as he takes in my colored coiffure.

I tuck a sapphire lock behind my ear with a satisfied smile. I rather like the added highlights. They coordinate perfectly with Bertrand’s own blue streaks that have found their way into the rest of his hair since he took up regular shaving. Speaking of which…

I turn to watch my husband as he strolls down the walk to join us, his gaze fixed firmly on me until I’m tucked comfortably in his arms. Then and only then does he greet my family, shaking hands with my brothers and presenting my sister with a bow. I wait for them to finish their formalities and trot off after the servants carrying the baggage up to the castle before pulling Bertrand to the side.

“You have something for me, I expect?” I lift my head with a coy smile.

“Ah, of course. How remiss of me to forget.” He promptly plants a kiss on my upturned lips.

I poke his ribs, eliciting a chuckle. “That is not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Oh, you mean this,” he laughs, pulling a silver flask from his breast pocket. “My mistake.”

I snatch the flask from his hand. “Such wit, *mon amour*.”

Bertrand grins as he pulls out a matching flask and unscrews the top. “You’ve been practicing your French. *Très Bien*.”

“And you’ve been feeding our tower resident,” I reply, tipping the flask to my lips and reveling in the warm blood sliding over my tongue. I lick my lips in appreciation. “Fresh.”

Bertrand takes a sip of his own, mirroring my appreciative response. “It’s amazing what a little pig’s blood can do when poured through the right vessel.”

“Indeed.” I tuck my flask back into Bertrand’s pocket and give his clean-shaven face an affectionate pat. “Celeste may have been a terrible mistress, but I’ll admit, she makes an excellent wine press.”

Bertrand catches my hand with a smirk, turning it so that he can press a kiss along the inside of my wrist. “A more appropriate use of her power I could never have imagined,” he murmurs, drawing me into his arms and shifting his attentions to my neck. I turn my head to the side, savoring the feel of his lips as they work their way up to my jawline, but I hold my hand up before he captures my mouth.

“Later, darling. Right now my family is headed inside, and I have yet to inform them of the most important house rule.” Bertrand catches the tip of my finger in his teeth, nipping just hard enough to make heat pool between my legs. I sway into him, my resolve melting. “Perhaps we have a few minutes to spare,” I relent, causing Bertrand’s face to split into a victorious grin. “After all, what are the odds even *my* troublesome brothers will find their way into the tower so soon?”

“Non-existent considering it’s locked and the only key is in my pocket,” Bertrand replies, leaning in for a kiss.

I slip my hand into his trouser pocket, lips curving against his as I brush his hardening length. “A key, hmm? Is that what you call this?”

“You, Madame de Montragoux,” he growls, hoisting me into his arms and carrying me toward the gardens, “are terribly wicked.”

And with my legs wrapped around his waist and my blue-streaked hair falling free of its pins, all I can do is grin. “I think the word you’re looking for, *Monsieur* de Montragoux, is perfect.”

He laughs, and it sends the most delightful vibrations through my chest as he kisses his way down to my décolletage.

“Wickedly perfect.”

The End

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